

A service for Easter 6 (StF) – 17th May, 2020

Call to worship: Psalm 56 verses 3 and 4

When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me? Amen.

I wrote our first hymn a week after visiting the late Revd. Peter Knight. During a long conversation, he lamented that he feared that in some services the congregation never felt the presence of Christ. This is my response. We shall sing, 'Christ is here, within this place!'

1. Christ is here, within this place!

Bringing his redemptive grace.

Stop: be still and hear his voice,

Bid him welcome and rejoice. *Chorus:*

Light of the world, Redeemer King,

We our heartfelt praises sing.

2. Christ is here, both God and man:

God contracted to a span;

Emptied out of all but love;

When he came from heav'n above. *Chorus:*

3. Christ is here to tend each soul,

Seek the lost and make us whole.

Christ came here to set us free

On a cross at Calvary. *Chorus:*

4. Christ is here! He lives again,

Shares our joys, our woes, our pain.

Christ is here, his word receive;

Fear no more, trust and believe. *Chorus:*

5. Christ is here and he must reign

In our hearts, or all is vain.

Christ is here! Come one, come all,

Worship him and heed his call. *Chorus:*

M. Rider 5th October, 2018 (To 'Lucerna Laudoniae' StF 102i) Written after visiting Revd. Peter Knight on 30th September.

Let us pray.

Amazing Heavenly Father, as we meet you here in worship today, we continue to celebrate Christ Jesus' triumph over sin and death. You are the Eternal Word who brought life into being throughout the universe and yet, despite our sinfulness, you have loved faithfully throughout the ages. We remember in how you came as Christ Jesus to show us how you want us to live and how he saved us from the power of sin, by dying on a cross at Calvary. We rejoice that his resurrection offers everybody the gift of eternal life, not through any merit of our own, nor through our works, but as a gift of grace.

Loving Lord, we offer our heartfelt thanks to you for all you have done for us, given us and accomplished in us throughout our lives: thank you for people who have guided, loved and inspired us; for everything that has enriched our lives and brought us happiness. Loving Lord, your goodness overwhelms us as we reflect upon it, yet our own shortcomings rise before us, reminding us how far short we have fallen from what you would have us be.

Merciful God, although Jesus showed us how we should live, we confess that we don't always love and serve you wholeheartedly, nor do we love our neighbours as we love ourselves. As we turn away from what we know is wrong, we ask your forgiveness for the sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Loving Lord, you hear and answer our prayers and now offer us both forgiveness and a new beginning. Help us, therefore, to serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and warm-heartedly from now onwards, so we may honour you in the beautiful name of the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.

We shall say the Prayer Jesus 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 next hymn was written in 1974 by David Mansell, a physics graduate, engineer and businessman who is now engaged as a full-time evangelist in London. He also composed the melody for this hymn. Let us sing hymn number 353, 'Jesus is Lord!'

Offertory

Our next hymn introduces our Prayers of Intercession and hopefully will set us in a reflective state of mind. We shall remain seated as we sing through hymn number 395, 'Spirit of the living God' (Iverson) – twice

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'.

Living Lord, we offer our praise and thanksgiving to you, the sustainer of all life and our Saviour. Whilst we thank you for this beautiful, self-sustaining world, we also recognize much its brokenness, stemming frequently from human pride, foolishness, greed, spite, cruelty and indifference. In response to your constant love, we offer ourselves to play what part we can, however small, to make this world a better place, not just now but in the future. Help us to serve our neighbours as your earthly hands by granting us the necessary wisdom, courage, steadfastness, insight and compassion, so we may answer Jesus' call to service.

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

Lord, the prophets prayed for, justice and mercy, which are the precursors of peace, so we pray for the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and understanding may grow among all nations and peoples We pray for the governments of the nations of the world, that through their leadership mercy and justice may be established and endure. Teach us the value of negotiation and compromise when disputes arise, so we can resist the temptation to take up arms. We pray for our enemies and those who wrong us that we may bear a Christian witness and offer peace instead of hostility and kindness for hatred. We remember, too, the victims of warfare, terrorism and persecution throughout the earth: people whose lives have been changed by injuries to body, mind or spirit; those who have lost loved ones and especially for refugees forced from their homes and whose search for safety often leads to them being exploited, or put in harm's way. Grant all for whom we pray hope, courage and support, so they are able to rebuild their lives and face the future with confidence.

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

We pray for everybody who ministers to and cares for the suffering, the friendless and the needy, that they shall fulfil the Lord's purposes in their work and outreach. We offer our plea for the deliverance of victims of the coronavirus COVID 19 and we grieve with families who have lost loved ones in this pandemic. Heavenly Father, many of us are filled with anguish about the Media's reports about the suffering of people here and abroad. Our courage and faith are being tested by the bleakness of both the gloomy news and the strains of this lockdown. Draw us close to you, take away our doubts and reassure us that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we all may face an uncertain, even threatening future, with grounded hope.

We certainly remember with gratitude all doctors, nurses, ancillary staff, care workers, key-workers and kind-hearted volunteers in the United Kingdom who are potentially putting themselves in harm's way as they seek to help Coronavirus patients and vulnerable members of society. Heavenly Father, guide, protect and bless them in their work.

Loving Lord, hear our prayer for the NHS which we know is under immense pressure. May it receive the support and equipment it needs to heal the sick and to grow to meet the changing needs of our society. We offer our thanks for the healing rendered at our local hospitals, especially New Cross and Russells Hall, as well as for the work our GPs and health workers in the community. Grant them the determination and courage to cope with the pressures they are facing and may they find blessing and safety in their work.

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

God our inspiration and guide, bless, inspire and aid governments, scientists, researchers and authorities as they seek to deal with the effects of COVID 19 and to protect their populations by their policies. May those

policies prove effective in controlling the disease. Hear our prayer for countries that lack welfare systems to combat this virus, and grant that international support will soon be forthcoming, despite the needs of better equipped nations that are preoccupied with COVID 19 at home.

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

We remember all in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit, neighbours bowed down by the pressures of life, failed relationships and bereavement, for those who are living with a dementia, their families, friends and everybody who cares for their needs. In a time of silence, we bring our concerns to you, confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will reach out to them in compassion.Gracious God, where it is possible, let us be part of the answer of our prayer for those around us, by being sensitive to their needs and offering them practical support, but hold everybody for whom we pray in your loving arms so they may find comfort, courage, healing, hope and above all else lasting embrace of your peace.

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

Lord hear our prayer for our Church, other churches in our circuit and, indeed, for the World Church, so that in the might of the Holy Spirit we may be bold in proclaiming and living out Good News. May our words and deeds of kindness reveal the grace and beauty of our Saviour and draw our neighbours to him.

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

Abba, heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and families and keep us safe in your care. Bring us through these troubled times, trusting in your grace and sharing the love you give us in such abundance with our neighbours, so we honour you in the name of our risen Lord Jesus. Amen.

"Breathe on me, Breath of God, / Till I am wholly thine; / Until this earthly part of me / Glows with thy fire divine." We sing hymn number 370, Edwin Hatch's, 'Breathe on me, Breath of God,'

The first reading is Acts chapter 17 verses 22 to 31

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said:

"Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

God did this so that people would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everybody by raising him from the dead." Amen.

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 14 verses 15 to 21

"If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, they are the ones who love me. Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them." Amen.

Charles Wesley wrote our next hymn in 1746, but, amazingly, it never appeared outside Methodist hymn books until 1979. I find that difficult to understand, because I think it is one of Revd. Wesley's finest hymns. We shall sing hymn number 378, 'Father of everlasting grace,'

Sermon: "He will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth." John 14: 15
Fifty-seven years ago, I gained my A and B Class Gliding Licence at RAF Cosford by flying three solos in an open-cockpit glider. I have a souvenir of the gliding course, a small piece of plywood, part of the instructor's seat of the glider in which I flew three pre-solo checks to prove my competence. April 1963 was blustery, so my second pre-solo glide took place in a rainstorm, I misjudged the landing, so we bounced some twenty feet into the air and, although I regained control and landed properly, I heard the most terrible oaths behind me. I soon discovered the reason for the bad language: the instructor's seat, which was already cracked, had given way and the CFI had received a number of splinters in his posterior! Against his better judgement, the CFI flew the final check and sent me on my first solo with a warning not to break the glider! Strangely, when I reached the top of the launch and released the cable, it was not the threat that came to mind, but the oft-repeated instructions: that inner-voice directed my movements until I was safely on the ground and guided me through the two other solos which earned me my licence, when I realised how well – and patiently – I had been instructed.

What does this have to do with our readings today? In John's gospel, Jesus was praying for his disciples at the Last Supper when his earthly ministry had reached its climax. In a matter of weeks they were to be commissioned to take the Good News to the world, but they were far from ready for their 'solos'. Christ knew that within hours, they would desert him in his hour of need, that they would remain in hiding when he was crucified, then three days later they'd experience difficulty accepting his resurrection. If we add to that their frequent misunderstanding of his teachings and a massive sense of failure and inadequacy, then it is clear why Jesus felt it necessary to reassure them and to pray for his Father to protect them against the world's spite and persecution.

Christ promised them that God would give them the Spirit of truth to be with them forever. Our Bible translates the original Greek, '**Paracletos**' as '**Counsellor**', yet the Holy Spirit is also a **teacher and encourager**. His purpose is to reveal God's wishes, love and power as he lives within those who obey Christ's call. In him we enter a new, closer relationship with God the Father and through him the risen Jesus himself will live in our hearts. Jesus told his followers, '**I will not leave you orphaned**'. In other words, they would not be evangelising on their own, nor relying on their own resources, for the Holy Spirit would give them all they need to answer their call, including knowledge, language and all Christ's teachings – provided they loved him and kept his word.

Our reading from Acts shows that it is not always easy to persuade sceptics, for when Paul preached in Athens, his audience already believed that he was a babler – the word they used to describe him alludes to a crow picking up scraps in a field and therefore means a sponger, or ne'er-do-well. Two distinct groups existed in the city at that time: Epicureans, who taught that there were no gods, or if any existed they were too remote to be of significance, and the Stoics, who believed that the universe was a living organism with all people slaves of the divine Logos, or Reason, linked to the god Zeus, so only knowledge and ethics were important.

Paul noted that the Athenians were religious, for they had a wayside altar to an **UNKNOWN GOD**. He declared that he would reveal the identity of this **UNKNOWN GOD**, so he described God's nature, carefully avoiding references to Hebrew Scriptures, for they held no authority over his listeners. Instead, he used references where his and Stoic beliefs were similar, for example, "**As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'**"

Nevertheless, when Paul decried idolatry and pointed to Judgement through '**the man he has appointed**' adding, '**He has given proof of this to all people by raising him from the dead,**' he found a stumbling block for most of his audience, for they did not believe in resurrection, let alone that Jesus' resurrection was an historical fact. Many sneered at him, whilst others said they'd hear him on another occasion, presumably after they had a chance to think about his words. Only a few became followers of Christ there and then.

Some commentators say this shows that Paul failed, but it demonstrated his belief in the power of the Spirit to do what philosophical argument would inevitably fail to do – win people to Jesus. He knew he could not win in his own strength, for in his first letter to the Corinthians he wrote, '**we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**' That is why he turned to the Counsellor for help. Paul sowed the seeds of faith in those who had not rejected the message outright, so the Spirit could work upon their hearts and minds.

The Holy Spirit is available for us to draw on in times of difficulty and weakness, as happened with Doris Brown, a woman as big in stature as in her personality. 6feet 6inches tall, with an enormous sense of humour, Doris was a missionary in China shortly before Mao Tse Tung took control in 1949. The Chinese Communist Party wouldn't allow any deviation from state dogma, so Doris was arrested and subjected to brainwashing. She was questioned for hours till she became very disorientated and afraid. Suddenly, in the midst of her confusion, Doris recalled Jesus' promise about the Holy Spirit. **'When they arrest you, do not worry about what to say, or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not you be speaking, but the Spirit of your Father, speaking through you.'**

Doris prayed for help and was guided to answer every question with a line from the **Apostles' Creed**, starting once again after she'd finished every statement of faith. This time it was her Chinese interrogators who cracked and, after trying little a longer, they returned Doris safely to England, undaunted by her experiences.

If we find discipleship more frightening than challenging and fear we may fail in a crisis, take heart, for that pathetic group of failures – the disciples – were transformed into the most dynamic evangelical force the world has seen – after **the Holy Spirit dwelt in them**. Be assured, he's still working in the world and will work through us, if we call on him and let him do so. **On many occasions both as preacher and a MHA chaplain I've felt totally inadequate, so I've prayed for help and he's never let me down.**

Unlike Athenians, we worship the God who not only revealed himself through Christ Jesus, but has redeemed us from sin and death. God's love for us is so strong that he won't desert us and the very fact we can draw on his power and wisdom through the Holy Spirit frees us to serve Jesus in love and truth. Therefore, let us dare to do so in confidence that he is here with us, every step of the way. Amen.

We close our worship with a hymn I wrote at Brierley Hill Methodist Church during "Ignite" a year ago tomorrow. Let the words, 'Dare to dream', be a challenge and a spur to our discipleship.

1. Dare to dream! God's kingdom's here,

Off'ring hope throughout the earth:

Dare to speak of Christ the Lord,

God, who shared our mortal birth;

Dare to strive to live out love,

Raise the fallen, show their worth.

2. Dare to teach Christ's love for all –

Of his death at Calvary:

Dare proclaim his sacrifice

From our sins has set us free;

Dare affirm Christ rose again,

Off'ring life eternally.

3. Dare to love – which is God's Law –

Serving all in Jesus' name:

Dare to trust the Spirit's power;

Dare ignite the Holy Flame:

Dare to follow in his stead,

Spread abroad our Saviour's fame.

**4. Dare to serve through good or ill,
Trusting in his saving grace:
Dare to seek and do his will,
Spirit-bound in Love's embrace;
Till our calling we fulfil
And we see him face-to-face.**

M. Rider – after 'Ignite' at Brierley Hill 18th May, 2019.

Suggested settings: "Madrid" StF 154 or "Heathlands" StF 134. Improved by Revd. Josephine Soon.

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.