

**A service for 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 Lent 2 (StF)**

**Call to Worship: Psalm 121 verses 5 to 8**

The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. 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!**

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**Let us pray.**

Almighty, Sovereign God, Maker of all life throughout the universe, we have come to worship and adore you as we celebrate your wisdom, power, faithfulness, goodness,

grace and holiness. Lord, whose might is as boundless as your love, we are here to sing your praises, to pray in faith and to receive and to respond to your word. You are the one true God who from the beginning has performed mighty deeds and upheld a covenant with human beings who have answered your call.

As we journey through Lent, we remember in humble gratitude that you shared our mortal form as Christ Jesus, who has taught us with words and deeds of authority the love that builds us up, not the knowledge that makes us conceited and selfish. Jesus is indeed the pattern for how you want us to live and when he became the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world and was raised from death, he broke the power of sin and death and offers us everlasting life as a gift of grace, not as something we deserve or earn by our works. Therefore, with joyful hearts, we offer you thanks and praise, for your everlasting grace. All glory, honour power and praise be yours now and evermore. Amen.

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

Thank you, Lord, for our lives, for our fellowship here, for everything that has brought us pleasure, for people who have brought light and joy into our lives, as well as experiences and challenges that have given meaning to our lives and forged our character. Thank you for this beautiful planet on which we live and help us to treat it better, so future generations may inherit a healthy world.

Lord, in your mercy..... **Hear our prayer.**

Merciful God, we know we don't deserve such blessings, for we often fall short of what we know we ought to be and what you want us to be. In sadness we confess that we do not always love and serve you with all our heart; we don't always care for other people as we would like to be cared for. Help us turn away from our sinful ways and forgive us in Jesus' holy name.

Lord, in your mercy..... **Hear our prayer.**

God most merciful and holy, you hear and answer our prayers. We believe that you have pardoned us and call us to follow you once more. Grant us the power of your Holy Spirit so we may love and serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

***We shall say the prayer that 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.**

***The hymn-writing partnership between John Bell and Graham Maule has been a blessing for the Church. The depth and spirituality of their words are almost unrivalled among their contemporaries and their choice of popular melodies – usually old Scots ballads – help us concentrate upon their message, rather like the Wesley's practice two hundred years earlier. Sadly, Graham Maule passed away in December 2019, when he was only 61. We shall sing number 673, 'Will you come and follow me'.***

**1. Will you come and follow me**

**If I but call your name?**

**Will you go where you don't know**

And never be the same?

Will you let my love be shown,  
Will you let my name be known,  
Will you let my life be grown  
In you, and you in me?

2. Will you leave yourself behind

If I but call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind

And never be the same?

Will you risk the hostile stare

Should your life attract or scare,

Will you let me answer prayer

In you, and you in me?

3. Will you let the blinded see

If I but call your name?

Will you set the pris'ners free,

And never be the same?

Will you kiss the leper clean

And do such as this unseen,

And admit to what I mean

In you, and you in me?

4. Will you love the 'you' you hide

If I but call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside,

And never be the same?

Will you use the faith you've found

To reshape the world around

Through my sight and touch and sound

In you, and you in me?

5. Lord, your summons echoes true

When you but call my name.

Let me turn and follow you,

And never be the same.

In your company I'll go

Where your love and footsteps show.

Thus, I'll move and live and grow

In you, and you in me.

© John Bell & Graham Maule WGRG Ioana Community (1987)

***We shall now bring our prayers of intercession to the Lord.***

Gracious, heavenly Father, Christ Jesus came to save and heal the broken world, for which we now pray. We receive daily reports of situations that are heart-breaking and beyond our powers to remedy directly, so we turn to you, for whom nothing is impossible. Lord, inspire and encourage people who wield power and influence to bring about much-needed change as well as using us to build your kingdom here by reaching out to neighbours who are in distress or need.

Jesus came as Prince of Peace and so we pray for an end to conflicts which cause so much destruction and suffering around the world. We pray for an end to the war in Ukraine on the first anniversary of Russia's invasion. We grieve about the profound privation and suffering of the civil population pray for an end to their anguish and the

opportunity for them to rebuild their lives in peace and security. We pray, too, that the troubles in Jerusalem will end with an understanding between Jews and Palestinians. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of national leaders, so they turn away from using violence as a means of gaining their own way. Instead, may they govern with mercy and justice which are the foundations of true peace.

We pray for victims of war, terrorism, prejudice and oppression. Grant them peace and healing of body, mind and spirit and may they receive the support and encouragement they need to rebuild their lives and face the future with confidence.

Lord of all, we pray for the leaders of wealthy nations to be generous in offering aid to countries where there is great poverty and suffering, in particular lands afflicted by droughts, famine and natural disasters, such as the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria and recent major floods in Brazil and New Zealand. We ask a special blessing upon work being done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid to provide victims with desperately-needed aid.

We pray, too, for people in this country for whom life is a struggle with increasing inflation, food, energy and fuel costs. Bless food banks, warm spaces and other initiatives like holiday clubs which are helping the poor, but may new ways be found to offer hope and support to people who are facing the awful choice between heating their homes, or of eating properly during this winter.

God of shalom, of healing and wellbeing, we pray for everybody we know who is sick in body, or mind, or spirit. Be with people who are waiting for, or recovering from operations and with those whose treatment has been delayed by factors beyond their control. May all of them receive the treatment and support they require to be restored to health and grant them renewed strength, healing, hope and peace not only by the professional care and support they are given, but by feeling your presence during their time of need.

We also remember people around us who feel lonely, or neglected, or who are bearing the anguish of bereavement. We pray for the unemployed and homeless, particularly at this time of year. In a period of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help at this time .....  
Lord, help us to be sensitive to the needs of people around us who are in any kind of need, or trouble, so we can befriend and offer them practical support. We pray that you will enfold all of them in the warmth of your love, so they may receive healing, comfort, courage, hope and peace.

God our Saviour, we pray for this church and churches in our Circuit, that we may be a light of hope to a sin-darkened world. We pray, too, for the World Church, that old differences may be set aside and all Christians learn to serve you in unity of mission to build your kingdom in spirit, love and truth. Abba, Father, bless us and our families as we seek to answer our call to serve you. May the joy of knowing how dearly you love us inspire us to let the light of your love shine through our actions and words, as we share your blessings with everyone we meet and honour you through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

**The Gospel reading is John chapter 3 verses 1 to 17**

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said,  
“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

In reply Jesus declared,  
“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered,

“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” Amen.

*We continue our worship as we sing a hymn, based on 1 Samuel 3:9, which she wrote at Weston-Super-Mare on 19<sup>th</sup> May, 1867. Frances Havergal was a daughter of the Rector of Astley in Worcestershire and was an accomplished linguist, and musician as well as a poetess. She became an enthusiastic evangelist after some kind of experience when she was fourteen and wrote several fine hymns, including this one. We shall sing hymn number 666, ‘Master speak! Thy servant heareth’.*

**1. Master, speak! Thy servant heareth,  
Waiting for thy gracious word,  
Longing for thy voice that cheereth;  
Master, let it now be heard.  
I am listening, Lord, for thee;  
What hast thou to say to me?**

**2. Speak to me by name, O Master,  
Let me know it is to me;  
Speak, that I may follow faster,  
With a step more firm and free,  
Where the Shepherd leads the flock,  
In the shadow of the Rock.**

**3. Master, speak! Though least and lowest,  
Let me not unheard depart;  
Master, speak! For O thou knowest  
All the yearning of my heart,  
Knowest all its truest need;  
Speak! and make me blest indeed.**

**4. Master, speak: and make me ready,  
When thy voice is truly heard,  
With obedience glad and steady,**

**Still to follow every word.  
I am listening, Lord, for thee;  
Master, speak. O speak to me!**

© Frances Ridley Havergal (1836 – 1879)

**Sermon:** *“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”* John 3:3  
An Axolotl is an amphibian native to Mexico. It exists quite happily as a tadpole, because the water is always warm and food is abundant, even producing axolotl tadpoles. However, a few years ago, a French scientist took some axolotls to Paris. She wanted to see how they would react to cooler water and a different diet, but she hardly expected the outcome, for the axolotls suddenly developed into salamanders! Clearly, in a favourable, sheltered environment axolotls did not need to mature into what Nature had intended them to be, so they had to be challenged to find new life.

Our Gospel reading relates how Nicodemus, a respected member of the Sanhedrin – seventy rabbis who were responsible for both religious decisions and, under Roman jurisdiction, for civil rule in Judah – visited Jesus by night. He probably did so, because he knew how opposition towards Jesus was growing in the Council of Elders and did not want to become mired in controversy. Nevertheless, Nicodemus wanted to know more about Jesus’ teaching, yet he did not understand that Jesus was more than a prophet and miracle-worker, for he addressed him as a rabbi and a teacher, but not as the Messiah.

Jesus’ replied, **“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”** Nicodemus was certain that the Lord had not referred to a second physical birth, but could not grasp what kind of birth Jesus alluded to. Now the Greek used in John’s original text is **anōthen**, meaning not only ‘again’, but ‘from above’, so what Jesus actually meant was that we need to be transformed spiritually, from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God’s light. Jesus’ reference to water and the Spirit was probably a guide to the pathway of salvation, for baptism, signifying repentance – turning away from sin and returning to God – often preceded the coming of the Holy Spirit. In effect, Nicodemus was told that, in order to enter the kingdom of God, we must turn to him (that is, repent) before we can be reborn by the Spirit.

Nicodemus was still uncertain about the nature of the Holy Spirit, for he did not usually make his dwelling among ordinary people in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus told him that Isaiah, Joel and Ezekiel had spoken of a new age with its working of the Ruach or Holy Spirit. Ezekiel had said, **“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws”**. Although he was one of Judah’s leading scholars, Nicodemus still found it difficult to comprehend what Jesus was telling him, because it challenged so much of what he believed and represented.

After all, as a Pharisee, Nicodemus believed that people would gain the Lord’s favour by scrupulously observing Torah, the Law given to Moses, and all the 613 Rules of Righteousness; yet Jesus was offering God’s favour through faith, not by works. After a lifetime of labouring under the heavy yoke of justification by law, Nicodemus was being offered the easier gift of justification by faith! To reinforce that point, Christ declared that, just as the rebellious Israelites had been saved from the bites of venomous snakes when they looked at the bronze snake on a pole that Moses raised, so sinful human beings would be saved if they looked on him – or believed in him – after he had been lifted up on his cross.

Whether or not Jesus actually said, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have**

**eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him,”** or John was making his own statement of faith, those two sentences are probably the most telling in the gospels: **God loves all people, not just a select few, so much that he gave his Son’s life to save us from our sins if only we trust in Jesus and follow his teachings.** We are saved by faith, so we are free to serve the Father as a response to his grace.

Whilst it is uncertain that Nicodemus found the faith he needed to follow Jesus, it is recorded that he rebuked the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin for condemning Jesus without hearing him and he helped Joseph of Arimathea to bury the Lord, so perhaps he did become a follower.

Lent is an ideal time to consider our own discipleship. Are we simply coasting as individuals, or as a church, content with the status quo, or are we dissatisfied, but afraid to make changes? I have decided to retire as a MHA Chaplain this Easter, not to seek a life of idleness, but to explore new ways of serving Christ in this Circuit and neighbouring Dudley. For years I have advocated the Methodist call to reach out and support our communities: I hope retirement will provide opportunities for me to practice what I have preached. It may also invigorate Bridge Court with the ministry of a new chaplain. Lest any of you think this transition is easy, let me put you straight. I hate the idea of leaving the comfort of a calling I’ve loved for eighteen years and, to be honest, I’m a little apprehensive, too. However, I believe Christ is calling me to walk a different path, just as God the Father called Abram to leave his family at Haran at seventy-five – my age! If it was good enough for Abram, who didn’t have Christ as his guide and Saviour, it is good enough for me.

As a church, or as individuals, are we being challenged to a new start, or a new direction? Are we too comfortable to allow ourselves to develop as the Lord would like us to? Do we need to leave our comfort zones in order to realize our true potential? This Lent, as we walk with Christ to Gethsemane, Calvary and the empty tomb, let us make time to really explore his will, so that we may use our gifts, graces and talents to his glory. Lord, our Redeemer, grant us the faith to let go of the familiar and follow where you lead us. Amen.

*We conclude our service with a hymn by the prolific and long-lived Methodist Minister, Revd. Fred Prat Green, who wrote most of his hymns after he sat down. It was written in 1969, entitled “the Caring Church”. Hymn number 415, ‘The Church of Christ, in every age,’*

**1. The Church of Christ, in every age,  
Beset by change, but Spirit led,  
Must claim and test its heritage  
And keep on rising from the dead.**

**2. Across the world, across the street,  
The victims of injustice cry  
For shelter and for bread to eat,  
And never live until they die.**

**3. Then let the servant Church arise,  
A caring Church that longs to be  
A partner in Christ’s sacrifice,  
And clothed in Christ’s humanity.**

**4. For he alone, whose blood was shed,  
Can cure the fever in our blood  
And teach us how to share our bread  
And feed the starving multitude.**

**5. We have no mission but to serve  
In full obedience to our Lord:  
To care for all, without reserve,  
And spread his liberating Word.**

© *F. Pratt Green {1903 – 2000}*

***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.**