

A service for 3rd April, 2022 Passiontide (StF)

Lent Prayer

Loving, heavenly Father, it is so easy to abuse our authority over others, to misuse our spiritual gifts and skills and to possess more than we need, rather than helping less fortunate neighbours. Help us to resist temptation to act selfishly and cruelly. Instead, guide us by the perfect example of your dear Son, our Saviour, who gave himself generously as the atonement offering for the sins of the world. Amen.

Call to Worship: Psalm 126 verses 4 to 6

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. They who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Graham Kendrick in 1977. We shall sing the first two verses of hymn number 30, 'Jesus stand among us'.

1. Jesus, stand among us

At the meeting of our lives,

Be our sweet agreement

At the meeting of our eyes.

O Jesus, we love you, so we gather here;

Join our hearts in unity and take away our fear.

2. So to you we're gathering

Out of each and every land,

Christ the love between us

At the joining of our hands;

O Jesus, we love you, so we gather here;

Join our hearts in unity and take away our fear.

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Let us come to God in Prayer.

Almighty God, Author and sustainer of life throughout the universe, we come to offer you our praise and thanksgiving for your amazing grace and goodness with which you bless us day-by-day. Your power and wisdom are immeasurable, as is your loving-kindness which led to your incarnation as Jesus Christ, who came to redeem us and restore us to a right relationship with you as your earthly children, who may call you, 'Abba' / Daddy'.

As we journey through Lent, we remember how our Saviour was rejected by the Sanhedrin, betrayed by a friend, deserted by his followers, brutally beaten by soldiers and crucified at Calvary, yet forgave those who killed him. What can compare with Jesus' love, for he offered himself as the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world? He bore our punishment and broke the power of Satan. His resurrection has opened the gates of heaven, so death no longer has the final word and we are granted new life when our time on earth draws to a close.

Amazing God, thank you for the many blessings we have received from you throughout our lives, for friends and families, work and rest, our homes and food, the experiences, opportunities and challenges that have added lustre to our lives.

However, merciful Lord, we confess that we don't deserve any blessing, for we have failed to love others as we love ourselves and we are not always wholehearted when we serve you. As we recall the wrong we have done and the good we have neglected to do, we turn from them towards the path of righteousness, asking you to forgive us in the name of Christ our Saviour, who said that when we truly repent you will take away our sins and remember them no more.

Heavenly Father, you hear and answer our prayers, offering us pardon, rather than condemnation. Help us to live as you want us to by helping our neighbours and revealing Christ's good news in our words and actions for as long as we live. 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.

Graham Kendrick wrote our next hymn for Spring Harvest in 1984 after much research into the concept of the God, who created and loves everything, taking human form, becoming the Suffering Servant prophesied by Isaiah.

Surely, few descriptions of the passion have been written with greater poignancy than the third verse,

*'Come see His hands and His feet,
The scars that speak of sacrifice,
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered.'*

We shall sing hymn number 272, 'From heaven you came, helpless babe'.

**1. From heaven You came,
Helpless babe, entered our world,
Your glory veiled; not to be served
But to serve and give Your life
That we might live. *Chorus:***

*This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the Servant King.*

**2. There in the garden of tears,
My heavy load he chose to bear;
His heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not My will but Yours,' He said. *Chorus:***

**3. Come see His hands and His feet,
The scars that speak of sacrifice ;
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered. *Chorus:***

**4. So let us learn how to serve,
And in our lives enthrone Him;
Each other's needs to prefer,
For it is Christ we're serving. *Chorus:***

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***We come now to our prayers of intercession. We begin with a prayer for Ukraine.
Let us pray.***

Lord of all nations, hear our lament for our brothers and sisters in Ukraine as they face a military onslaught from Russian forces. Merciful Lord, be with all Ukrainians in their plight: grant President Zelenskyy and his advisors both courage and good judgment as they lead resistance against oppression; let your presence strengthen and empower the

armed forces and militia as they resist Russia's might; protect and comfort civilians, women, children and elderly, who have to shelter from bombardment and who lack power, clean water and who face diminishing supplies. Grant them steadfast courage and look on them with compassion. Remember, too, Ukrainian refugees, who are fleeing to friendly countries. May they be made welcome and receive all the support they need.

We pray that a peace treaty can soon be negotiated to end the conflict, that the Kremlin's plans will be frustrated and Ukraine will remain a free, democracy after hostilities have ceased. May other nations continue to provide practical support and hospitality not only during the conflict, but as long as help is needed to restore peace to Ukraine and help it rebuild what war has destroyed. We offer our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

We continue with prayers about our concerns for the world.

God of creation, although you have granted us stewardship over this beautiful planet, we grieve about the brokenness we see here and abroad. Lord, we want to play what part we can in making the world a better place, but we recognize that our own powers are limited and confess that, at times, many complex situations fill us with grief that threatens to overwhelm us. However, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with greater ability, more power and influence than we possess, who can heal the suffering around us, for we know that to you all things are possible. Nevertheless, Lord, give us the courage to play what part we can by campaigning against both prejudice and injustice, by doing all we can to relieve poverty, by learning to use the earth's resources more carefully and by encouraging others to do so, too.

Lord of all nations, besides praying for an end to the conflict in Ukraine, we pray for peace across the world. Guide national leaders to resolve disputes with neighbours by negotiation and compromise, rather than resorting to military action. Instead, teach them to rule with justice and mercy, for only then can true peace be established and prevail. In your mercy, hear our prayer for all victims of warfare, terrorism and persecution. Grant them the help, resources and courage they need to rebuild their lives and to be healed in body, mind and spirit.

We pray for the people of Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen and Sudan where serious famines threaten catastrophic loss of life. May the situation in Ukraine not divert the attention of governments and relief agencies from providing much-needed aid to the stricken populations of these countries.

Gracious Lord of well-being, reach out in compassion to people around us who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, particularly those who have been unable to have access to treatment during the pandemic. May they now receive the professional care and support they need to be restored to health and may they experience your loving presence during their time of need.

We remember people who have lost loved-ones during the past two years, both because of COVID19 and for other reasons, but who have been unable either to mark their passing or to mourn because of restrictions at funerals. We pray for neighbours who are suffering from the physical, mental, social and economic effects of the pandemic and, not least of all, for children whose education and general wellbeing have been seriously harmed during the pandemic. Grant all of them the support, comfort and courage to recover.

In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care and, as we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them in loving-kindness:

Lord, wherever possible, help us to offer them practical support and friendship and we ask you to embrace everybody for whom we pray with the warmth of your love, offering them healing, courage, comfort and lasting peace.

Holy God, we pray for not only churches in our district, but the World Church as we emerge from the dark shadow of coronavirus. Help us learn new, effective ways of meeting the needs of our communities and to reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus by serving him with united, faithful hearts. Let us be your holy priesthood by being bold in our discipleship.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and help us to share the abundance of your love with our neighbours, so our lives bring you honour through Christ Jesus our Lord and friend. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Graham Kendrick in 1993 and is largely based on Philippians chapter 3. We shall sing hymn number 489, 'All I once held dear,'

1. All I once held dear,

Built my life upon,

All this world reveres

And wars to own;

All I once thought gain

I have counted loss;

Spent and worthless now,

Compared to this: *Chorus*

Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you,

There is no greater thing.

You're my all, you're the best,

You're my joy, my righteousness

And I love you, Lord.

2. Now my heart's desire

Is to know you more,

To be found in you

And known as yours.

To possess by faith

What I could not earn,

All-surpassing gift

Of righteousness: *Chorus*

3. Oh, to know the pow'r

Of your risen life

And to know you in

Your sufferings:

To become like you

In your death, my Lord,

So with you to live

And never die: *Chorus*

Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you,

There is no greater thing.

You're my all, you're the best,

You're my joy, my righteousness

*And I love you, Lord.
Love you, Lord,
Love you Lord.*

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Our Gospel reading is John chapter 12 verses 1 to 8

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." Amen.

Sermon: *"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial."* John 12:7 Lazarus, Mary and Martha were friends and supporters of Jesus. It is clear that Jesus was used to receiving hospitality at their home which was two miles south of Jerusalem, for our Lord was very close to the family. Today's reading is set soon after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead after his body had lain in the tomb for four days, long enough for decomposition to have begun, so it was not a simple case of resuscitation. During the raising of Lazarus, Martha had declared Jesus to be the Messiah and the sisters' despair over the death of their brother had only been matched by their ecstasy when he was restored to life. Six days before his Last Supper at Passover in Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples were staying at Lazarus' home in Bethany. Martha served the meal, while Mary decided to show her reverence and love for our Lord. She washed his feet, dried them with her hair, rather than a towel, as a sign of humility, then broke the seal on an alabaster jar of nard, an expensive, fragrant oil used only on special occasions, before pouring the nard over Jesus' feet. Clearly, John was present, for he not only described how the whole house was filled with the oil's fragrance, but was there to hear Judas Iscariot's indignant criticism of Mary's extravagant gesture.

Judas Iscariot probably voiced the feelings of other disciples when he rebuked Mary for making such a lavish demonstration of her devotion: after all, a pint of nard was worth three hundred denarii, a man's annual wages. Surely, he argued, had it been sold, the nard could have benefited the poor and, irrespective of John's claims that Judas intended to siphon off some of the funds, some of those present might have agreed with him. Jesus, however, defended Mary of Bethany's action: **"Leave her alone! Let her keep what she has for the day of my burial. You will always have poor people with you, but you will not always have me."** Clearly, Mary had not used all the ointment, but Jesus once more told his listeners that he would soon suffer and die, so that the remaining nard could be employed then.

The sentence, **"You will always have poor people with you, but you will not always have me"**, is not intended to be a divine endorsement of poverty, nor a defence of the status quo in society. Instead, it is a recognition that, as the causes of poverty are many and varied, Jesus' followers would have plenty of opportunities to help the poor, but they were running out of time to demonstrate their love for him in his human form, as Mary had just done – another pointer to his imminent passion.

A significant feature is Mary's profound sense that Jesus was going to die, whilst everybody else was blithely unaware, even though Jesus had forecast his passion and death for some time. Were the disciples blinded to what was going to happen within a week because they were convinced that they were facing glory and triumph as they entered Jerusalem next day? – the hosannas and palm leaves would have reinforced their Messianic expectations. Was Lazarus so absorbed by his resuscitation from the tomb that he could not believe his friend, Jesus, could suffer such a fate? Was Martha too preoccupied with being hostess to see the writing on the wall? Did Mary break open the seal on the jar of nard to try to make everyone else see what was going to occur? Almost certainly she wanted to tell Jesus in her own way that she was totally devoted to him.

Several years ago, my wife and I used to buy flowers from a stall in West Bromwich outdoor market, so we got to know the stallholders very well. A week before Mothering Sunday, one of the stallholders warned gloomily that the price of flowers would increase dramatically and he anticipated that, as a result, he and his wife would sell fewer flowers. However, whilst his prediction of price-rises was correct, my wife and I were astounded to see the stall almost besieged by shoppers on the eve of Mothering Sunday. As we approached, the stallholder's wife waved cheerily to us and pointed to a sign attached to the awning: "Better to buy flowers for the living to enjoy, than to buy them for their funeral." The message clearly made its point on West Bromwichians!

As latter-day disciples, do we offer all that we have and are to Christ Jesus, not only in material resources, but also in terms of time and care? Are we like Judas, not as betrayers, but inasmuch that we hold something back for ourselves – 'for a rainy day'? How many of us fail to use our talents and time in serving Jesus, even though we hear his call to become more involved in his great work of spreading good news in our daily lives? I have to confess that I wasted nearly a decade before I responded to my call to preach, but I acted at once when Christ called me to serve as a chaplain at Wednesfield MHA and I've never regretted it.

The next two weeks of Lent challenge us to be like Mary, giving of our most precious and best to the Lord in whatever way we can. We shall read again how God's own Son was tempted to hold back from self-sacrifice as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, to find a cheaper solution to redeem sinners like us. Instead, he submitted to the Father's will in the most extravagant gift in history: his life for the sins of the world. We shall read about his betrayal, the desertion of his friends, the show trial and cynical denial of justice by the Roman Prefect of Judea. We shall relive the cruel mockery of the Roman soldiers, the agony and shame of crucifixion and – three days after the seeming failure of Jesus' ministry, his resurrection – **the new thing God did** – that caused Paul to write, '**But all those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ's sake.**'

As we approach Easter, let us make time to think how we can show our extravagant love for Jesus, as individuals, as a church – or even as a circuit, by setting aside some time to pray and meditate, inviting God to lead us in our discipleship as we face the challenges of post-pandemic life and then doing our uttermost to answer his call. Amen.

"See from his head, his hands, his feet, / Sorrow and love flow mingled down; / Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, / Or thorns compose so rich a crown?" The father of English hymnody, Isaac Watts, gave us what is probably the finest of all hymns – number 287, 'When I survey the wondrous cross'.

1. When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

2. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

3. See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

4. His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er his body on the tree;
Then am I dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

5. 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.

© *Isaac Watts {1674 – 1748}*

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.