

A service for 26th March, 2023. Passiontide (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 111 verses 1 to 3 (New Century)

Praise the LORD! I will thank the LORD with all my heart in the meeting of his good people. The LORD does great things; those who enjoy them seek them. What he does is glorious and splendid, and his goodness continues forever. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written in 1739, on the first anniversary of the conversion of the Wesleys, after a Moravian friend, Peter Bohler, remarked to Charles Wesley, 'Had I a thousand tongues, I would praise Him with them all.' Charles saw a hymn in those words and the rest is history. We shall sing hymn number 364, 'O for a thousand tongues to sing'.

1. O for a thousand tongues to sing

**My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of his grace.**

**2. My gracious Master and my God,
Assist me to proclaim,
To spread through all the earth abroad
The honours of thy name.**

**3. Jesus – the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease;
'Tis music in the sinner's ears,
'Tis life, and health, and peace.**

**4. He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.**

**5. He speaks; and listening to his voice,
New life the dead receive;
The mournful, broken-hearts rejoice;
The humble poor believe.**

**6. Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,
Your loosened tongues employ;
Ye blind behold your Saviour come;
And leap, ye lame, for joy!**

**7. See all your sins on Jesus laid;
The Lamb of God was slain;
His soul was once an offering made
For every soul of man.**

**8. In Christ, our Head, you then shall know,
Shall feel, your sins forgiven,
Anticipate your heaven below,
And own that love is heaven.**

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

Let us pray.

Almighty, heavenly Father, the works of your hands proclaim your wisdom, holiness, power and glory, for you fashioned the vast galaxies of stars throughout the Universe and gave us stewardship of this lovely, self-sustaining world with its remarkable

varieties of plant and animal life. More than that, you have tried to establish a covenant of love and faith with human beings from the beginning of our history, yet when we rebelled against you and made ourselves your enemies, you took on our humanity as Christ Jesus, not only experiencing our lives, but dying for our sins.

As we hear again about the passion of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, we are amazed by the love you have for fallen humanity, for you not only shared our mortal frame as Jesus, but became the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. By his death at Calvary, Jesus broke the power of Satan and, when he was raised, he triumphed over death, so that through his grace we have the gift of eternal life and death no longer has the final word. Glorious heavenly Father, our words are inadequate to describe your greatness, so we pray that you will accept the best we can offer in our worship and in our lives, for we want to be your holy people, a light to all who do not know and love Christ Jesus, in whose name we offer this prayer. Amen.

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

Loving Lord, thank you for all the blessings we have received from you throughout our lives: the good things we enjoy; enriching experiences and opportunities and people who have loved us, guided us and brought light and joy to us. 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 Lord, we ask your forgiveness for our failure to live as you would have us live: for our foolishness, hard-heartedness, unwillingness to forgive and our lack of faith. Lord, pardon us for the sins we have committed and the good we have neglected to do, as we repent of our wrongdoing in Jesus' lovely name.

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

Most gracious God, we believe that you answer our prayers, and offer us a fresh beginning. Therefore, help us to model our lives, our responses and our deeds on the perfect example of your dear Son, Christ Jesus, so he may shine through all we do and say, thus guiding neighbours to know, love and follow him. 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.

Our next hymn was written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, a Methodist minister, born in 1903 and who died in 2000. Most of his hymns were written after he sat down, so he had a very productive retirement! Hymn number 653, 'O Christ, the Healer, we have come'.

**1. O Christ, the Healer, we have come
To pray for health, to plead for friends.
How can we fail to be restored,
When reached by love that never ends?**

**2. From every ailment flesh endures
Our bodies clamour to be freed;
Yet in our hearts we would confess
That wholeness is our deepest need.**

**3. How strong, O Lord, are our desires,
How weak our knowledge of ourselves!
Release in us those healing truths
Unconscious pride resists or shelves.**

**4. In conflicts that destroy our health
We diagnose the world's disease;
Our common life declares our ills;
Is there no cure, O Christ, for these?**

**5. Grant that we all, made one in faith,
In your community may find
The wholeness that, enriching us,
Shall reach the whole of humankind.**

© Fred Pratt Green (1903 – 2000)

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

Almighty God, your Son Christ Jesus promised that you will hear us when we ask in faith, so we ask you to receive the prayer we now offer. We know you have given us a beautiful, self-sustaining planet upon which to live, yet we are aware of its brokenness, both through natural disasters and, more often because of human, pride, foolishness, cruelty, neglect and greed. We offer ourselves to support our neighbours in response to your grace, but our powers are limited, whereas yours are infinite. Therefore, we turn to you, our gracious heavenly Father, in our prayer for the world.

Help us learn to co-operate with one another by standing up against prejudice in any of its guises, to encourage one another to care for our earth's ecosystem, so future generations will inherit a healthy planet on which to prosper. Grant us courage to stand up for justice for all peoples, not just those with whom we feel comfortable, or whose values we share and help us to do what we can to support poor people here and abroad.

Lord we pray for healing in our warring world. Heal the fractured relationships that lead to conflicts, particularly in Ukraine and Jerusalem. Heal the pride and selfishness of leaders who refuse to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise..... Heal the victims of warfare, persecution prejudice and terrorism. May they be able to rebuild their lives in security and peace Heal us, too, when our relationships with family, friends and neighbours break down, so our lives reflect what we ask for the world.

We offer our prayer for healing to the victims of natural disasters especially populations inundated by recent flooding in Malawi, Brazil and New Zealand, besides everyone affected by the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. Compassionate God, 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 which are afflicted by droughts and famine. 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.

Jesus came to heal and comfort the marginalised and sick whom he met, so we pray for the healing of everybody we know who is unwell in body, mind or spirit, or recovering from injuries or operations. Grant them wellbeing, hope and peace not only through the professional care and support they are given, but by feeling your presence during their time of need. Remember, O Lord, people who are living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers who struggle to manage day by day. Reassure them in their confusion, comfort them in their distress and let them feel loved and valued amidst the problems they are facing.

We offer our prayer for people who have been bereaved, or those who are lonely, undervalued, homeless and unemployed. In a time of silence we offer the names of people for whom we are particularly concerned
Help us to be sensitive to the needs of people around us, so we can befriend and support them. Loving Lord, embrace them in the warmth of your love, so they are comforted, strengthened, encouraged and offered hope and peace.

Holy God, we pray not only for this Church and churches in our Circuit, but also for the World Church. As we journey through Lent to Calvary and the empty tomb, may your Holy Spirit heal and unite us in love and outreach, so we become beacons of hope to our sin-darkened, and often selfish world.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our friends and families. Keep us free from harm and grant us strength to resist temptation to sin. May the Holy Spirit help us share the love you give us in such abundance with all-comers, so we honour you in the sacred name of Christ our Saviour. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 11 verses 17 to 45

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Jesus said to her,
“Your brother will rise again.”

Martha answered,
“I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus said to her,
“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.”

When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said,

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

“Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said,

“See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

“Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.”

Then Jesus said,

“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice,

“Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them,

“Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

Therefore, many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. Amen.

We shall continue our worship as we sing a hymn written by an unknown author in Pakistan and translated from Urdu by Dermott Monahan in 1940. It is set to a Pakistani folk tune and covers Jesus’ ‘I am’ sayings in John’s gospel. We shall hymn number 252, ‘Jesus the Lord said, “I am the Bread”’.

1. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Bread,

The Bread of Life for the world am I.

The Bread of Life for the world am I,

The Bread of Life for the world am I.’

Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Bread,

The Bread of Life for the world am I’.

2. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Vine,

The true and fruitful Vine am I.’

3. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Way,

The true and living Way am I.’

4. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Light,

The one true Light of the world am I.’

5. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Life,

The Resurrection and the Life am I.’ *Anonymous © tr. Dermott Monahan (1906 – 57)*

Sermon: “I am the resurrection and the life.” John 11:25

Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, were close friends of Jesus and lived in Bethany, a village two miles east of Jerusalem. Jesus and his followers sometimes stayed with Lazarus on their way to festivals in Jerusalem. Just before our reading, Jesus was travelling to celebrate Pessach or the Passover, but while they were near Jericho, they received news that Lazarus was gravely ill. By then, Jesus was facing serious opposition and, indeed, had nearly been stoned in Jerusalem on his last visit, so his followers were not very keen for him to go to Bethany, let alone Jerusalem, Thus, they would have been relieved that their Master stayed by the Jordan, though they might have wondered why that he did nothing to help his friends from Bethany who had supported and regularly offered hospitality to him whenever he visited Jerusalem.

On the third day after hearing about Lazarus, Jesus said they were going to return to Judea. Several disciples tried to dissuade him. However, Jesus wouldn't be put off, saying that it wasn't yet time for him to come to harm. He also told them that Lazarus was already dead, adding that he was glad he'd not been there, so they might believe. When the other disciples hesitated, Thomas took the lead, saying, "Let us all go with the Teacher, so that we may die with him." It sounds grand, especially as when the Lord was betrayed by Judas Iscariot, Thomas and his friends all ran away, but when he spoke Thomas really meant that they should share Christ's dangers, rather than literally die – *simply because he couldn't accept that the Messiah could die*. Thomas may have thought Jesus was testing them, seeing how firm their faith was.

In Bethany, even before they reached Lazarus' house, Martha approached the Lord and said with some feeling that, if he'd been present earlier, then her brother wouldn't have died. Jesus replied, "Your brother will rise to life." Martha was unsatisfied, thinking Jesus meant Lazarus would rise at the end of time, but instead the Lord added, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die." Martha must have been startled by the claim, but before she could reply, her sister, Mary, greeted Jesus with the same words as Martha, but with many tears, too. Jesus was visibly moved by their distress, so he asked where the body lay.

The sisters and mourners led us to the tomb cut out of sandstone and sealed with a large stone. When he reached Lazarus' tomb, Jesus wept. He'd not wept when he raised Jairus' daughter, nor the young man at Nain, but he did so at Bethany. However, Jesus had much to weep over: the disciples' and sisters' incomprehension; the crowds' scepticism; the loss of his dear friend and – no doubt – the imminence of his own death. However, he did not just weep tears of grief. He was angry about the power that death held over humankind and about those unyielding fetters of sin that bound us to death. Nevertheless, people may have thought it was pointless when the Lord prayed aloud. After all, Lazarus had been entombed for four days and in Judea his body would already have been in an advanced state of decay. Jairus' daughter and the widow's son had been newly-dead, so they could have been given new life before their bodies began to decompose. You might say they could have been resuscitated, but how can a festering corpse be restored and Lazarus was such a corpse?

In a loud voice Jesus commanded his friend to come out from the tomb and he did – still wrapped in his tallit, or funeral shawl, with his face covered with a cloth. Unlike everybody else, Jesus showed no surprise: he knew what he was doing. As everyone stood, disbelieving the evidence of their eyes, Jesus told those nearest to remove the face cloth and tallit, so Lazarus was not encumbered by them. No doubt Mary and Martha ran to embrace their brother, sobbing with joy and praising the Lord. Witnesses were amazed, for Jesus had just proved beyond doubt that he'd power even over death itself. He had proved beyond doubt that he is the Messiah, both human and divine, for only the Almighty has power over death!

Of course, not everyone was pleased. Some Pharisees, who were scrutinising everything the Lord did, reported the event to the High Priest, Caiaphas. Their account convinced the High Priest that the man they considered a Galilean agitator would lead an uprising at Passover, a time of religious fervour when rebellions were likely to occur – and, fearing savage reprisals from Rome, Caiaphas determined that Jesus must die to prevent an uprising. Isn't it ironic that by raising the dead to life, Christ's own death was sealed!

A week later, as Jesus entered Jerusalem, he was met by crowds so enthusiastic it is possible that if he'd been minded to do so, he could have led a successful uprising, well-supported by the mob. I say mob, because within a week many of those who shouted, 'Hosanna!' were crying 'Crucify him!' However, that kind of revolution wasn't his way, for Jesus entered the Holy City on a young donkey, like a peacemaker, not a warrior. None of his disciples guessed that in a few more days he was going to be betrayed, tried, crucified and then raised by God three days later— but you will be hearing more of this later in Lent.

What does this story mean to us? It means that Jesus has power over all things, including over death, our last enemy. We now know that by his death and resurrection Christ has taken the burden of our sins from us and he offers each of us everlasting life. We have nothing to fear in this life or the next because of his self-sacrifice. Nothing, even death, can separate us from God's love. We are free to serve him because we want to, not because we are compelled to, so our service ought to be offered willingly in response to his grace, *More than that, Jesus teaches that his Father, the Lord Almighty listens to and answers our prayers, albeit in his own time and not always as we expect.* If we trust him, he can breathe new life and hope into situations that we may think beyond remedy, for the God who gave His Only Son for us will never desert us or let us down. 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?” We shall close our worship as we sing a hymn written by Isaac Watts 316 years ago, yet one that I don't think has been equalled. Hymn 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.