

**High Town Ragged School {but with StF} 10.45 a.m. 24th May, 2020
Call to Worship: Psalm 150**

Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD. Amen.

I wrote our opening hymn shortly after I visited Revd. Peter Knight, shortly before his death. Our conversation inspired these words.

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.

Creator God, the beauty of the earth, with all its life-forms, shows the power of your Word, whilst the vastness of the universe reminds us how small a part of creation we really are. Your wisdom and power know no bounds, yet they are matched by your love for us human beings, for from our beginnings your desire has been to draw us close to you, sinful though we are. You came to live amongst us as Jesus so you could experience our lives, know our joy and woes, our hopes and fears and our trials and temptations. Jesus showed us how to live as you want us to, but he was willing to face death on a cross to save us from our sins.

When he rose from the dead, Jesus broke the power of death and offers us eternal life through faith in him, as his gift of grace, not something we can earn, or deserve. Awesome God, we offer our worship and adoration to you. Thank you for all the good things we enjoy, for people who have inspired and loved us; thank you for being our guide and protector on our life's journey, for being our Good Shepherd.

Holy God, we are aware that, like foolish sheep, we have strayed from the path you call us along. We have not loved and obeyed you as we know we ought. We have caused our neighbours pain and distress not only by our actions and our words, but by our failure to help them in their times of need and troubles. Loving Shepherd, forgive us. Bring us back to you and help us to be obedient and loving henceforth, for Jesus said that all who repent in his name will receive your mercy.

Heavenly Father, you hear and answer our prayer for forgiveness. You not only pardon us, but call us to follow you once more. May we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that our loving response to your grace brings you honour in Jesus' name. 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.

Our next hymn, by Caroline Noel, was inspired by St. Paul's words to the Philippians: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Hymn number 317, "At the name of Jesus"

Offertory

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of ourselves and others. Let us pray.

Living Lord, we recognize the many blessings we receive from you, though at times we take your grace for granted. Create in us a willing, faithful heart, so we may serve as your earthly hands by caring for our neighbours. Grant us the necessary wisdom, courage, steadfastness, faith and compassion, so we may answer Jesus' call.

Lord, we pray for the peace of the world, that, mercy and justice may be established and endure throughout governments of all nations, so peace shall reign on earth. Teach us the value of negotiation and a willingness to compromise when disputes arise, so armed conflict will be avoided. We remember, too, the victims of warfare, terrorism and persecution throughout the earth. Grant them effective support, courage and hope, so they may rebuild their broken lives.

As we grieve with families and friends who have lost loved ones during this pandemic, we pray for the deliverance of victims of COVID 19. Heavenly Father, many of us are filled with anguish at the suffering that we hear about in the Media of people here and abroad. The bleakness of both the gloomy news and the strains of the lockdown are severely testing our faith and resolve. Reassure us that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we all may face an uncertain, even threatening future, with hope grounded in your salvation.

Loving heavenly Father, bless all doctors, nurses, ancillary staff, care workers, key-workers and kind-hearted volunteers in the United Kingdom who potentially put themselves in harm's way as they seek to help Coronavirus patients and vulnerable members of society.

Hear our prayer for the NHS which we know is under immense pressure. May it receive all the support and equipment it needs to heal the sick and to grow to meet the changing needs of our society. Bless our local hospitals, especially New Cross, Russells Hall and The Corbett, as well as for our GPs and health workers in our community for their efforts to keep us safe. Grant them the determination and courage they need to cope with the pressures they are facing and may they find safety in their work.

Lord, hear our prayer for people in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit, people bowed down almost to breaking point by the pressures of life, failed relationships and bereavement, beside all who live with a dementia and everybody who cares for their needs. Gracious God, where it is possible, help us be part of the answer of our prayer for those around us. Make us sensitive to the needs of people for whom we pray, so we can offer them friendship and practical support. Lord, hold everybody for whom we have prayed in the warmth of your love, so they may find comfort, courage, healing, hope and above all else your peace.

Spirit of truth and love, hear our prayer for our church, the churches in this area and, indeed, for the World Church, that guided by the Holy Spirit we may be bold not only in proclaiming, but living out Good News. Help your Church to be a beacon of hope in a world darkened by despair and fear.

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

Our next hymn was written by John Bunyan as part of his book "The Pilgrim's Progress", written during twelve years' imprisonment in Bedford Gaol for preaching without a licence. Nearly two centuries passed before the poem was published as a hymn, but it encourages us to remain steadfast in our faith in Christ through difficulties we may have to face for his sake. We shall sing hymn number 486, "Who would true valour see,"

The New Testament reading is 1 Peter chapter 4 verses 12 to 14 and chapter 5 verses 6 to 11

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 17 verses 1 to 11

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed:

“Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

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.” Amen.

We continue our worship as we sing the second hymn on our sheets, ‘God’s love prevails, whatever may befall,’ which I wrote in response to the attack on the World Trade Centre on 11th September, 2001.

**1. God’s love prevails, whatever may befall;
His love is freely given unto all.
Though terror strikes and all is disbelief,
God stands with us and fully shares our grief.**

**2. Our hope lives on through evil's cruellest deed:
Amidst life's wreckage, God perceives our need.
His voice calls still, the Shepherd to His flock,
And keeps us strong when our opponents mock.**

**3. As anger burns while we lament our loss,
God knows our hurt – his Son died on a cross!
In evil's shadow, help us keep in sight
God's love for all, which is our guiding light.**

**4. We are God's hands and each is called to serve:
Trust in His grace and we shall keep our nerve.
Though deepest anguish wounds us like a knife,
God's Spirit helps us to rebuild our life.**

**5. God will prevail – for Him the victory:
Justice and mercy will set people free;
Helping your neighbour, seeking what is right,
Will vanquish evil in love's potent light.**

Martin Rider (p.m. 16th September, 2001. To "Eventide" StF 141– modified 22nd June, 2008 / 30th May, 2011)

Sermon: *"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."* – John 17:11
I began teaching when pupils who stayed until sixteen sat either GCEs or CSEs – yes, I am really as old as that, but not quite as old as Methuselah! In those bygone years few subjects were assessed, so pupils faced written examinations. Syllabi were often overcrowded, so teachers had to second guess what was likely to be asked in the exam so students had a better grasp of areas that were likely to be questioned. In March and early April teachers would prime pupils for their exams, providing revision notes and hints of how to impress examiners. We would try to encourage all of our students, but I paid particular attention to ones who were borderline, just so they'd begin to believe in themselves. However, when the examinations took place, they were on their own, relying on a combination of natural ability, good revision and what they had been taught – plus my fervent prayers for their success!

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. He certainly needed to, for they had been signal failures in so many ways: they struggled to understand his teachings; they quarrelled about who was greatest. He knew they would run away when he was betrayed, would hide during his crucifixion and would be slow to believe in the resurrection. Even Peter, the Rock on whom Jesus declared he'd build his Church, would deny knowing him three times.

Jesus' prayed that God would glorify him, that is to sustain him through his passion and death, to accept his death as the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, to raise him from death and to restore him to the state he enjoyed before he shared our mortal clay. The purpose of his glorification was for Jesus to reveal the true nature, wisdom, power and love of God the Father to humankind through the disciples. It must have seemed far too great a task for such a group of failures, but Jesus was undaunted.

He declared that he had authority over all people, to judge them, to give his life for them and to offer them eternal life. He defined eternal life thus: **'That they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.'** In other words, we shall enter a new, intimate relationship with Almighty God through Christ, a relationship

that transcends earthly life. Eternal life is more than endless existence: it is being united with God, living in the light of his love, as his children, his holy people.

Jesus ended the first part of his prayer declaring that he had glorified God by fulfilling his mission, for his passion and crucifixion were imminent and only moments before his prayer, the disciples had unambiguously acknowledged that he came from God, so they had the basic elements of faith needed to take the Good News to the world. What they lacked, however, was the ability to translate their faith into active and effective mission. As a result, the second part of Christ's prayer was for his disciples, the Father's gift to him. He reiterated that they had accepted his authority and that the Good News was God-given, but he prayed for his Father's protection as they would remain in a hostile world after Christ had ascended. He anticipated that the Church would glorify him and the Father, but he was aware of the powers who would seek to destroy the Church. When he asked, **"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,"** Jesus was asking for them to be united in Spirit, love and truth, sanctified from the world by their faith, but dwelling in the world, so they could take the gospel message to the far corners of the planet and bring as many as would accept the message to love and serve the Lord. That is our calling, too.

Next week, we shall celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and his amazing effect upon the hundred and twenty, ineffective, fearful, failures in that locked room in Jerusalem. Their enthusiasm and courage amazed all-comers, whilst St. Peter's first sermon led to three thousand being baptised into Jesus' name. However, the Holy Spirit is not just confined to the history of the foundation of the Church two thousand years ago. Think of his significance in Methodism.

On 24th May, 1738 a small Anglican priest sat alone at a house in Temple Bar, London, in total despair, doubting if he was even a Christian, although he had been ordained thirteen years. That man, John Benjamin Wesley, was born into a God-fearing family: he and younger brother, Charles, were devoted sons; were honours students at Oxford University; gave generously to charity – so much so that John grew his hair long to save the cost of buying a wig and £4 per annum at the barber's, to give to the poor; they regularly visited the sick and ministered at Newgate Prison, comforting the condemned as they were on the scaffold. Despite these virtues, John Wesley declared that he **'was no better than the vilest offender in the kingdom'**, because of a great burden of unworthiness he carried.

In 1735, John and Charles Wesley had sailed for Georgia, America with high hopes to be great evangelists. However, their ministries were marked by a series of scandals and tactless enthusiasm that culminated with John summoning his flock to church by beating a drum loudly, early on the Sabbath. He grew so unpopular that someone fired a gun at him. The bullet missed its target, but the Governor told the brothers to return forthwith to England. They reached home in February, 1738 with a profound sense of failure. Clearly, their efforts to gain salvation by works had not succeeded! On the evening of 24th May, John Wesley went to a Moravian service @ Aldersgate Street, London, where in his own words: **"In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the *Epistle to the Romans*. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, *even mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.'**

The strange warming of his heart was the Holy Spirit taking charge. He brought about a remarkable transformation – the Wesleys felt freed from a sense of obligation to earn redemption for their sins and realised that forgiveness of sins and failure were God’s free gift. That knowledge left them free to serve God’s call as a loving response to his graciousness and led to one of the greatest spiritual and social revolutions in British history. Realising that Jesus wanted them to minister to the outcasts and marginalized of society in the early Industrial Revolution, the Wesleys and their followers brought Good News to parts of our industrial towns and villages that the established church daren’t even enter! Methodism was – and should still be – as much a social as a worship movement, but throughout its history it has made a deep impression on British society as well as in lands much further afield.

As Twenty-first Century disciples, the Lord challenges us to pick up the mantle passed from St. Peter to John Wesley and his co-workers: we are called to serve all-comers, not just fellow-Christians, just as Jesus reached out to Gentiles, outcasts and even Samaritans. No one is outside the scope of God’s love – even people we find it hard to like, or who are not open to Good News. We must let the light of God’s love shine from our actions, for only if and when we live out our faith will others hear and respond to our message of salvation and turn to Christ. Amen.

“My talents, gifts and graces, Lord, / Into thy blessed hands receive; / And let me live to preach thy word, / And let me to thy glory live;” We conclude our worship as we sing hymn number 661, ‘Give me the faith which can remove’

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.