

# 21<sup>st</sup> January 2024 – Morning Service

## Called by God

Megan Ashmore

### Call to Worship<sup>1</sup>

Listen to God speaking to us at the start of our worship together:

For just this hour, follow me. Listen to my word, follow me. Think about your life as my disciple every day, follow me. Pray, follow me. Sing, follow me. Come, let us worship God!

### StF 2 – Come let us sing to the One

1) Come, let us sing to the One,  
To the Father of life,  
Whose light fills the earth like the sun;  
Come, tell of the wonders he's done.  
Great is the world he has made,  
Are the myst'ries untold,  
Is his measureless power of old;  
Come, come let us sing to our God.

2) Come, let us sing to the One,  
To the Saviour of life,  
Find the fullness of God in the Son;  
Come, tell of the wonders he's done.  
Wild is the mercy of Christ,  
Is the richness of grace,  
Is the unending life we embrace;  
Come, come let us sing to our God.

*Ch) To our God, who is able  
To strengthen us in his grace  
Beyond all we imagine,  
Be all glory and praise,  
Be all praise.*

3) Come, let us sing to the One, to the Spirit of life,  
Leading us in the way of the Son;  
Come, tell of the wonders he's done.  
Strong is the Spirit within, is the boldness to speak,  
Is the power to run when we're weak;  
Come, come let us sing to our God.

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### Opening Prayer

Father God, we come. We come to worship you through music. We come to worship you through words in prayer and readings. We come to worship you through unspoken thoughts and desires. We come to worship you through your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Jesus, we come. We come to honour you; to glorify you; to praise you. We come to seek you; to learn more about you; to invite you into our lives. We come to ask for forgiveness; to ask for healing; to ask for restoration. We come to ask in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit, we come. We come because you have nudged us. We come because you have led us. We come because you have promised to be with us.

God the Father; God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, we come. We come to give thanks for all that we are and all that we have. We come to give thanks for the love of God, the obedience of Christ and the counsel of the Holy Spirit. We come to give thanks for all that you have done and all that will be accomplished in your name. And so we come to offer our lives to you in service, that your kingdom come, and your will be done. **Amen.**

### Reading: Psalm 62: 5 - 12

Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I shall not be shaken. My salvation and my honour depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.

Surely the lowborn are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie. If weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath. Do not trust in extortion or put vain hope in stolen goods; though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

One thing God has spoken, two things I have heard: 'Power belongs to you, God, and with you, Lord, is unfailing love'; and, 'You reward everyone according to what they have done.'

## Pause for thought

There are some wonderful metaphors and comforting phrases in this psalm: *find rest in God; my hope comes from Him; He is my rock and my salvation; He is my fortress; He is my refuge; Trust in Him; Power belongs to God; With God (sic) is unfailing love.*

Let's sit quietly with this psalm for a minute or two reflecting on what those phrases may mean. You might then like to offer a prayer to God.

## StF 628 – Faithful One

Faithful One, so unchanging	You are my Rock in times of trouble
Ageless One, You're my Rock of peace.	You lift me up when I fall down.
Lord of all I depend on You	All through the storm
I call out to You again and again.	Your love is the anchor
I call out to You again and again.	My hope is in You alone.

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## Reading: Jonah 3: 1 – 5; 10

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.' Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.' The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

## Reflection

"Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." I wonder have you been asked to do something recently? How did you respond? I spent a time thinking about this and came up with two recent occasions when I was asked to do something, with different responses. One was when I was tasked with taking orders for pudding at Feed My Sheep – the monthly lunch that we have at Kingswinford Church for people who regularly eat alone. I responded straight away – I'm quite at home talking to people and tallying information with paper and pen. The second occasion had occurred the week before. We were enjoying an evening with friends at New Year and as we were clearing away after the meal I asked if I could do anything. The hostess replied, "Well, I've just put the kettle on for hot drinks. She then opened the cupboard and said, "There's the mugs; teabags are in that cupboard; coffee is there. You could actually make a pot of tea." Then she added, "Although maybe if people are eating the cheese and crackers they won't want a hot drink yet." I latched onto that last phrase and beat a hasty retreat back to the dancing!! It wasn't that I wasn't willing to help. But catering is just not my bag! Having to make ten hot drinks, which might be coffee or tea, caffeinated or decaff, choosing mugs, judging how many teabags to put in the pot – it was all too much! So I took the easy option ... which was noted, and still plays on my mind.

Jonah initially took the easy option. If we consider the chapters before the passage we heard read, we recall that when God first asked him to preach to the city of Nineveh, Jonah ran away and headed for Tarshish, a place in completely the opposite direction.

***Lesson Number One: You can't hide from God.***

Because we all know what happened next. Jonah was thrown overboard, swallowed by a whale and eventually spat out onto the shore. God had a plan for Jonah. God knew that Jonah was the right man for the job. Jonah just needed convincing. To be fair, he recognised he had done wrong and willingly gave himself up to be thrown overboard to quell the storm which he believed was a result of his disobedience. And God provided the next step. The time spent in the belly of the whale allowed Jonah the opportunity to think and pray. So when the call came the second time, he responded more positively. Well at least, he obeyed the word of the Lord, if somewhat belligerently.

***Lesson Number Two: God will always find a way***

So Jonah went into Nineveh proclaiming, *"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."*

Mm. He didn't give them much did he? Jonah didn't explain why or how it would happen, nor who or what would cause it. He just gave the message of doom. But it was enough. Enough to stir up concern and curiosity, which in turn led the people to repent of their ways and be saved. Sometimes we don't need lots of explanation, theological insight or back story. Sometimes a few well-chosen words are enough to bring people to God. So job done. Everyone was happy. Actually no, not everyone. If we read on into the final chapter of this book we see Jonah having a mega-strop. Until this point we haven't been told why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. But now we get to the crux of the matter. Jonah didn't agree with God's decision to save His people rather than bring the destruction he had threatened. And he was angry. He as good as says that he knew that God would forgive them despite all their wickedness and so that's why he didn't want to go – they didn't deserve God's grace and compassion.

***Lesson Number three: God is always willing to forgive a repentant heart.***

Let's hope Jonah learnt that lesson. Because the book of Jonah finishes rather abruptly and inconclusively if we want a happy ending. We are left with an image of a sulky Jonah with God's words ringing in his ears: *"should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"*

*God's love for His creation reaches to the heavens, His faithfulness to the skies. His righteousness is like the highest mountains, His justice like the great deep. The Lord preserves both people and animals. How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! (Psalm 36:5 – 7)*

Like Jonah we may be called to serve God in a seemingly outrageous way, that contradicts our own ways of thinking; that challenges our understanding of God's grace and compassion; that makes us angry; and we may be tempted to run and hide. But God's ways are not our ways. We still have a lot to learn. So let's not make things more difficult and cumbersome for ourselves, but let's have the guts to say "Ok, I'll do it Lord, with you to guide me."

I heard an advert for Hurtigruten expeditions on the radio the other day. I only heard it the once and I can't remember the exact phrasing, but it was along the lines of someone saying how good it is to live in Norway. He was recounting a few plusses and then said what a delight it was to explore the country, concluding the advert with the words, "So go out with an open heart to receive what the day has to offer."

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, forgive us the times when we have turned away from your call; when we have pretended not to hear you; reinterpreted what we have heard; or even tried to remove ourselves from your presence. You know why we have responded in that way. We are sorry Lord and ask that you will help us to receive your call with open hearts, for we know that you will be with us and will not ask of us more than we can manage. Give us grace to serve you at all times and in all places. **Amen.**

## StF 556 – Just as I am

- 1) Just as I am, without one plea  
But that you died and set me free,  
And at your bidding, 'Come to me!'  
O Lamb of God, I come!
- 2) Just as I am, though tossed about  
With many a conflict, many a doubt,  
Fightings within and fear without,  
O Lamb of God, I come!
- 3) Just as I am, you will receive,  
Will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;  
Because your promise I believe,  
O Lamb of God, I come!
- 4) Just as I am - your love unknown  
Has broken every barrier down -  
Now to be yours, yes, yours alone,  
O Lamb of God, I come!
- 5) Just as I am, of that free love  
The breadth, length, depth, and height to prove,  
Here for a season, then above,  
O Lamb of God, I come!

Charlotte Elliott

## Reading: Mark 1: 14 - 20

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.' At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

## Reflection

Like Jonah, John the Baptist was called by God to give a message of repentance. Like Jonah, John the Baptist did not mince his words. And that is what got John the Baptist imprisoned. He spoke out against Herod's relationship with Herodias, his own brother's wife. John's proclamation of the gospel was therefore limited while he was incarcerated. I was going to say stilled, but I don't think even imprisonment would have stopped John sharing the good news when he could.

Jesus, having been baptised by John, and affirmed by God as ready for ministry, began to preach the good news of the gospel in Galilee. "*The time has come,*" he said. "*The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!*" William Barclay commenting on these verses writes, "*No sooner had Jesus taken his decision and decided his method than he proceeded to build up his staff.*"

My daughter has been trying to hire someone to do admin duties at her place of work. She has been surprised and rather frustrated by how difficult it has been. Firstly, having to sift through CVs to create a shortlist of suitable candidates – a challenge in itself!; then inviting them for interview only to have people not turn up or ring to say they've changed their mind or got another job in the meantime; then interviewing and offering the job, again to be informed they don't want it now, or again, not turning up, or turning up and not being the person they appeared to be in the CV and interview!

Jesus, of course, had the right idea when he called his disciples to follow him. There was no application procedure; no interview; no examination or observation in the workplace assessment. He simply asked them to follow and they did. Jesus based his recruitment process on the fact that they were local guys with local knowledge – they knew the area and the people; the customs and the traditions. That's what God asks of us - that we help Him share the good news with those we know and in the communities in which we live and work.

If we read around this text and match it alongside the other gospel writer's accounts, we are led to believe that Andrew and Peter at least had met Jesus before, and spent some time with him previously. That doesn't make the response of the disciples any less amazing, but helps us to see that they didn't just follow on a whim – they had an inkling that this was something special. Something special enough to lay down their nets - their livelihoods. How much more do we know of Jesus. He is special indeed – the Son of God; the Saviour; the Light of the World. He's worth following, isn't he? Is there something you want to lay aside to follow Jesus more closely?

Having called them to follow him Jesus then explains that he will use their skills as fishermen but retrain them as it were to catch people. What does Jesus say to me? Well I'm pretty sure he's not calling me to provide catering for his people. I hope not anyway!! I think he's calling me to use my teaching skills to teach people about him and how he can lead us into a relationship with God. What skill is Jesus asking you to use for him?

You say follow me, but I'm not sure where you're going.

You say follow me, as if you're leading me out of the chaos and confusion, but the closer I follow, the thicker the clouds of darkness seem to be and the less comfortable my life gets. You say follow me, but insist I leave "me" behind.

You say follow me, but wait just a minute.

Let me look you over, examine you and ask, "just who are you?"

You say follow me, and my heart knows it's what I was born to do.

You say follow me, but my head has different plans.

It sees the storm clouds you're brewing and the confrontation that arises wherever you go.

My mind makes up excuses, finds ways to dismiss you and remain in the lead.

But you say follow me, and I see the goodness and living water that flows from the river you're providing.

I see the beauty of your face and if what you say is true – it's the greatest story the world will ever know.

But you say follow me and it scares me because there's still some doubt.

But does that doubt have anything to do with you or because I know accepting you comes at a cost, knowing that I'll have to die to myself and admit I'm lost?

You say follow me. Grant that I may be willing to take up my cross. (Poem Written by Justin Farley)

## StF 558 – Lord you have come to the seashore

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|--|---|
| 1) Lord, you have come to the seashore,<br>Neither searching for the rich nor the wise,<br>Desiring only that I should follow.   | 2) Lord, see my goods, my possessions;<br>In my boat you find no power, no wealth.<br>Will you accept, then, my nets and labour?  |
| Ch) <i>O Lord, with your eyes set upon me,<br/>Gently smiling, you have spoken my name.<br/>All I longed for I have found by the water,<br/>At your side I will seek other shores.</i> | 3) Lord, take my hands, and direct them.<br>Help me spend myself in seeking the lost,<br>Returning love for the love you gave me. |
|  | 4) Lord, as I drift on the waters,<br>Be the resting-place of my restless heart,<br>My life's companion, my friend and refuge.    |

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## Prayers of Intercession<sup>2</sup>

You call us, Wanderer of seashores and sidewalks, inviting us to sail out of our smug harbours into the uncharted waters of faith to wander off from our predictable paths to follow you into the unpredictable footsteps of the kingdom; to leave the comfort of our homes and accompany you into the uncomfortable neighbourhoods we usually avoid. As we wait, in our simple, sometimes crazy, constantly uncertain lives, speak to us, Spirit of Grace: of that hope which is our anchor; of that peace which is our rock; of that grace which is our refuge.

You say to us 'Follow me ...' through a lifetime of loving and giving. We pray for those who need our friendship: those who are neglected by the people who should love them; those cast out by societal rules and practices; the needy; the misunderstood; the vulnerable; the lonely. May we love and give until they know that hope which is an anchor; that peace which is a rock; that grace which is a refuge.

You say to us 'Follow me...' into the dark places of suffering and fear. We pray for those who need our support: those who are ill, sorrowful or anxious; the bereaved and those whose relationships have failed; our brothers and sisters living in war torn countries or places affected by climate change causing drought or flooding. May we support them in whatever way we can until they know that hope which is an anchor; that peace which is a rock; that grace which is a refuge.

You say to us 'Follow me...' into the kingdom of light and joy and peace. We pray for those who need to hear the message of the hope to be found in Christ: those caught up in vicious circles of debt, despair, doubt or danger; those oppressed by authoritative regimes or persecuted for their faith; and for all people everywhere who have yet to hear the name Jesus and know the love of God's own Son, their Saviour. May we tell of the good news of the gospel until they know that hope which is an anchor; that peace which is a rock; that grace which is a refuge. **Amen.**

### **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 Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

### **StF 660 – Called by Christ to be disciples**

- 1) Called by Christ to be disciples  
Every day in every place,  
We are not to hide as hermits  
But to spread the way of grace;  
Citizens of heaven's kingdom,  
Though this world is where we live,  
As we serve a faithful Master,  
Faithful service may we give.
- 2) Richly varied are our pathways, many callings we pursue:  
May we use our gifts and talents always, Lord, to honour you;  
So in government or commerce, college, hospice, farm or home,  
Whether volunteers or earning, may we see your kingdom come.
- 3) Hard decisions may confront us,  
Urging us to compromise;  
Still obedience is our watchword -  
Make us strong and make us wise!  
Secular is turned to sacred,  
Made a precious offering,  
As our daily lives are fashioned  
In submission to our King.

*Martin Leckebusch © 1999 Kevin Mayhew CCL No. 515642*

### **Blessing<sup>1</sup>**

Listen to God speaking to us at the close of our worship together: As you go out into the world, follow me. At home with your household, follow me. At school and work, follow me. In everything you do this week, follow me And as you do, remember that I am with you always, even to the end of the world. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. **Amen.**

<sup>1</sup> *Written by Carolyn Brown, and posted on her Worshipping with Children website.*

<sup>2</sup> *From a worship order prepared by Rev. Bob Gibson for the London Conference of the United Church of Canada.*