

# 28<sup>th</sup> April 2024 – Morning Service

Olwen Meller

## Call to Worship

Have you ever thought that there is no such thing as a solitary Christian? Every Christian is linked to Christ and to all other Christians. This is clear from the words of Jesus 'I am the vine and you are the branches.'

## StF 25 – God is here!

- 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 his 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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## Opening Prayers

Living God, you spoke and the world was brought into being the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, night and day. Life in all its variety and abundance.

You spoke again in the book of the law, the poetry of the psalms, the chronicling of history and the message of the prophets revealing your will and proclaiming your purpose.

You spoke through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, through those who witnessed to his life and ministry and those who shared the building of his Church.

You have spoken through history, through preaching and teaching, through study and quiet devotion, through prayer and fellowship, through the wonder of this world, and you still speak today.

Your word, ever old, but always new. Able to redeem, renew and restore. Speak to us now, we pray. Help us use this season of Easter to listen more carefully to your voice and so walk with you more closely, this and every day. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

## Prayer of Confession

Heavenly Father, we confess that we have not been the people you would have us be. We have not loved you with our whole hearts and we have not loved our neighbour as ourselves. We thank you for your love for us even when we fail you and we ask that your blessing will continue upon us. **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 418 – We have a gospel to proclaim

- 1) We have a gospel to proclaim,  
Good news for all throughout the earth;  
The gospel of a Saviour's name:  
We sing his glory, tell his worth.
- 2) Tell of his birth at Bethlehem -  
Not in a royal house or hall,  
But in a stable dark and dim,  
The Word made flesh, a light for all.
- 3) Tell of his death at Calvary:  
Hated by those he came to save,  
In lonely suffering on the cross,  
For all he loved his life he gave.
- 4) Tell of that glorious Easter morn:  
Empty the tomb, for he was free.  
He broke the power of death and hell  
That we might share his victory.
- 5) Tell of his reign at God's right hand,  
By all creation glorified.  
He sends his Spirit on his church  
To live for him, the Lamb who died.
- 6) Now we rejoice to name him King:  
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.  
This gospel-message we proclaim:  
We sing his glory, tell his worth.

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## Reading: John 15:1-8

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.'

## First Reflection

Picture a hillside covered in vines, their arms stretched out in rows, the branches clasped and intertwined. The bunches of grapes are hanging down, plump and ready to be picked. It is a glorious evening and the scent of fruit is in the air. The owner strolls up and down the paths between the vines, occasionally picking one, tasting its sweetness, wondering if they are ready to be picked. Yes, tomorrow he will begin the harvest.

Then look at the dry twigs scattered on the ground, the wayward branches that didn't grow and were cut down weeks ago, and the rotting grapes, pecked by greedy birds; soon they will be swept up and put on the fire.

Think about how the vine grower made his choices. The pruning had to be vigorous enough to improve the size of the bunches he would use - more is not necessarily better. The vine must be reduced to its core for it to flourish. It takes years of experience and practice to make the right decision because once cut off the branch cannot be re-grafted.

The allegory of the vine and its branches stresses the unity that exists between Christ and his disciples - Christ and his Church; Christ is the vine, the disciples are the branches. Vine and branches need each other. The vine cannot bear fruit without the branches and the branches cannot have life if separated from the vine.

Jesus wrote no books, he left no buildings or monuments behind. He did something greater - he built a community, that was his 'monument'. I am the vine - you are the branches; this was the image he used to describe the community he had founded.

In order to fully understand this statement we need to know the context in which it was used. Jesus spoke these words to his disciples at the end of the Last Supper, probably on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before his death. It was a night when everything seemed to be breaking up, falling apart and ending. It was a night when all of his disciples would abandon him, when their leader would deny him publicly and another of their company would betray him. Yet this was the night he chose to speak about unity and togetherness. At first it seems a strange time to talk about unity, but on reflection we see that it was a most appropriate time. Jesus had been telling them that he was going away. They knew what he meant - he was going to his death. When Jesus began to talk about 'going away', the disciples were overcome with sorrow.

This then was the hour of departure, the hour of separation. At this lonely moment Jesus felt close to his apostles and he let them know it. He foresaw that they would abandon him that night. He foresaw that Peter would deny him and that Judas would betray him. Yet Jesus also saw that in spite of these upheavals their unity would survive. The apostles learned a lot about themselves that night, but they learned even more about Jesus. They learned that he loved them in and through their weakness. If they should ever get separated from him it would not be because he had cut them off. Far from being ended by the events of that night, their bond with Jesus would be strengthened. This was due, not to their faithfulness to him, but to his faithfulness to them.

I am the vine - you are the branches; this was the image he used to describe the community he had founded. It is a simple but profound illustration of community, closeness and interdependence. The branches need the vine - that is obvious. Cut off from the vine the branches wither and die. Just as the branches need the vine so we need Christ. But the vine also needs the branches. It is the branches that produce the fruit. This means that Christ also needs us - we are his branches. He depends on us to produce fruit in the world. Vines need to be pruned every year to produce fruit. If the courage to prune is lacking, only leaves will grow. Jesus never asked us to be successful - only to be fruitful.

From the earliest times, following Jesus was never just a private, personal matter. Christians came together to profess their faith in Jesus Christ, to give witness to his resurrection and to live by his teachings, just as we do today. We are Christ's witnesses. The witness of an individual is powerful but the witness of a community is more powerful still. By this all will know that we are living branches of the Vine, by the bond that exists between us and by the love we show for one another.

## StF 413 – Send down the fire of your justice

*Ch) Send down the fire of your justice,  
Send down the rains of your love;  
Come, send down the Spirit,  
Breathe life in your people,  
And we shall be people of God.*

1) Call us to be your compassion,  
Teach us the song of your love;  
Give us hearts that sing,  
Give us deeds that ring,  
Make us ring with the sound of your love.

2) Call us to learn of your mercy,  
Teach us the way of your peace;  
Give us hearts that feel,  
Give us hands that heal,  
Make us walk in the way of your peace.

3) Call us to answer oppression,  
Teach us the fire of your truth;  
Give us righteous souls,  
Till your justice rolls,  
Make us burn with the fire of your truth.

4) Call us to witness your kingdom,  
Give us the presence of Christ;  
May your holy light  
Keep us shining bright,  
Ever shine with the presence of Christ.

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## Reading: Acts 9:26-31

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

## Second Reflection

Any way you look at it, Paul's story is an extraordinary one. Before his conversion he was a religious fanatic, prepared to kill in the service of his vision. He fiercely persecuted the first Christians but he was converted on the road to Damascus. From being a fierce persecutor of the first Christians he became one of the greatest champions Christianity has ever seen.

A few days after his conversion he began to preach in the local synagogues that Jesus was the Messiah - the Son of God. The people found it hard to believe that this was the same man who had carried out organised attacks on the followers of Jesus. He proved too much for some Jews. They rounded on him calling him a turncoat and a traitor but he was more than a match for them when it came to debating about Jesus. Pretty soon things turned nasty. His enemies drew up a plan to kill him. The result was that Paul had to go into hiding. His enemies kept watch on the gates of the town in case he tried to escape but with a little help from his friends, Paul succeeded in outwitting them. One dark night they let him down over the wall in a basket and he escaped to Jerusalem.

Even in Jerusalem many of the disciples were suspicious of him. They could not believe that he was a genuine disciple. But then, a disciple by the name of Barnabas came to his aid. He introduced Paul to the apostles. Once they accepted that his conversion was genuine - things improved for him. Soon he was preaching about Jesus in Jerusalem. Here he did so with such enthusiasm that he made some Jews mad. Once again his life was in danger and once again he had to flee. His friends smuggled him out of the city and took him to Caesarea. From there he went on to Tarsus which was his home town.

When we consider the harm that Paul had done to the early Church it is easy to understand why many doubted the genuineness of his conversion. Had we been present at the stoning of Stephen and witnessed Paul's role in it wouldn't we, too, have doubted him? By his conversion Paul was changed fundamentally. The fact that Paul had persecuted the Christians didn't mean that he was evil through and through; there was another and better side to him. He was a highly committed person who was capable of hard work and great sacrifice.

Often we don't allow the possibility that a person can change. We resort to old clichés such as 'a leopard can't change his spots.' It doesn't help that ours is an unforgiving culture. Paul's conversion was genuine. On the road to Damascus he saw the error of his ways. The experience released his true self, the self he was called to be, and he went on to become a champion of the Christian faith. At the end of his life he was able to say 'I fought the good fight, I finished the race, I kept the faith'. These lovely words sum up the story of Paul's life - they could sum up our lives too.

### **A Prayer**

Lord we thank you for the bond you formed with us and for the bond that exists between us because of our union with you. Thanks to this bond we have visible riches to share with one another. Grant that we may never be separated from you, so that we may produce in the world the fruits of faith, hope, and love. **Amen.**

### **StF 634 – Fight the good fight**

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| 1) Fight the good fight with all your might;<br>Christ is your strength, and Christ your right;<br>Lay hold on life, and it shall be<br>Your joy and crown eternally.          | 3) Cast care aside; upon your guide<br>Lean, and his mercy will provide;<br>Lean, and the trusting soul shall prove<br>Christ is its life, and Christ its love. |
| 2) Run the straight race through God's good grace,<br>Lift up your eyes, and seek his face;<br>Life with its way before you lies;<br>Christ is the path, and Christ the prize. | 4) Faint not nor fear, his arm is near;<br>He changes not, and you are dear;<br>Only believe, and prove it true<br>That Christ is all in all to you.            |

*John Samuel Bewley Monsell*

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Almighty God, in whom we know the power of redemption, you stand among us in the shadows of our time. As we move through every sorrow and trial of this life, uphold us with the knowledge of the final morning, when in the glorious presence of your risen Son, we will share in his resurrection, redeemed and restored to the fullness of life and forever freed to be your people.

Creator of the universe, you made the world in beauty and restore all things in glory through the victory of Jesus Christ. We pray that wherever your image is still disfigured by poverty, sickness, selfishness, war and greed, the new creation in Jesus Christ may appear in justice, love and peace to the glory of your name.

Open our hearts to your power moving around us and between us and within us until your glory is revealed in our love of both friend and enemy, in communities transformed by justice and compassion and in the healing of all that is broken. **Amen.**

## StF 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.

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## Blessing

May you be fruitful branches of Christ the true Vine.

May your love not be mere words but something real and active.

May the Lord confirm your hearts in holiness so that you may be blameless in his sight.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and always. **Amen.**