

A service for 14th January, 2024 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 136 verses 1 to 6

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Amen.

As the psalmist wrote, we worship God who knows each of us intimately and loves us to the uttermost: through Jesus is Immanuel, God amongst and within us. Let us offer him worship and adoration, for he is truly worthy of it. Our opening hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community uses an old Gaelic melody from the Isle of Lewis to praise the God who keeps his promise, praise the Son who calls us friends. Hymn number 28, 'Jesus calls us here to meet him'.

1. Jesus calls us here to meet him

**As, through word and song and prayer,
We affirm God's promised presence
Where his people live and care.
Praise the God who keeps his promise;
Praise the Son who calls us friends;
Praise the Spirit who, among us,
To our hopes and fears attends.**

2. Jesus calls us to confess him

**Word of life and Lord of all,
Sharer of our flesh and frailness,
Saving all who fail or fall.
Tell his holy human story;
Tell his tales that all may hear;
Tell the world that Christ in glory
Came to earth to meet us here.**

3. Jesus calls us to each other,

**Vastly different though we are;
Creed and colour, class and gender
Neither limit nor debar.**

**Join the hand of friend and stranger;
Join the hands of age and youth;
Join the faithful and the doubter
In their common search for truth.**

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Let us pray.

Eternal Word who created the universe and gave life to everything that lives on this world, you revealed your glory through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amazing God, whose beloved Son came to us as a helpless baby, born to ordinary parents in the stable of an inn, rather than as a prince in a palace, it was your intention that Jesus should experience our lives and know us intimately. He came as Immanuel – God with us and among us – not remote from us. Heavenly Father, you gave him to the world even though you knew that he would suffer and die to redeem us from the powers of sin and death. Accept our praise and adoration for all that you have been, are and shall be and for your boundless, ceaseless love. Amen.

In our prayer of confession, when I say ‘Lord have mercy’, please respond with ‘Lord, forgive us’. Let us pray once more.

God of mercy, hear us as we confess our sins.

For the sin that has made us slow to learn from Christ, reluctant to follow him, and afraid to bear the cross: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive us.**

For the sin that has caused the poverty of our worship, the formality and selfishness of our prayers, our neglect of fellowship and the means of grace, and our hesitating witness for Christ: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive us.**

For the sin that has led us to misuse your gifts, evade our responsibilities, and fail to be good stewards of your creation: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive us.**

For the sin that has made us unwilling to overcome evil with good, tolerant of injustice, quick to condemn and selfish in sharing your love with others: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive us.**

Have mercy on us, O God, in your constant love; in the fullness of your mercy blot out our offences, wash away all our guilt and cleanse us from our sin. Create in us a clean heart, O God and renew a right spirit within us. Give us the joy of your help again and strengthen us with a willing spirit.

Loving heavenly Father, you hear and answer our prayers. In your grace you proclaim our sins forgiven and you call us to follow you. May we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, so we may serve you and our neighbours with joyful, faithful hearts in the name of Christ the One true Light. 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 second hymn was written by Allan Dickinson, who was an I.T. consultant for the Health Service in Cardiff. Although he was raised a Methodist, Allan became a Baptist lay preacher and was a great supporter of the Churches Together movement. Allan wrote the hymn after he heard a sermon that argued that, as Christians, we shouldn't wait for people to “come through the doors to us”.

Instead, we should go out to them – for that is where Christ is today. Amen to those sentiments! Hymn number 672, ‘Where can we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?’

1. Where can we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?

We want to serve you, to answer your call.

Where do you lead us and ask us to follow?

What should we do in our service to all?

2. ‘Go to the hungry, to those who have nothing;

Go where the farmlands are empty and bare.

I broke the bread for the people around me;

Out of my plenty, think what you can share.

3. ‘Go to the homeless, to those who have nowhere;

Go where my people sleep out in the rain.

I had no comforts but what others gave me;

Offer them shelter, give ease to their pain.

4. **'Go to the outcast, to those who have no-one;
Go where my sheep are rejected and lost.
I dined with sinners and reached out to lepers;
Go and do likewise, and don't count the cost.'**

5. **Where will we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?
We are your servants who answer your call.
You go before us, and there we will follow,
Taking our cross in the service of all.**

© Allan Charles Dickinson (b. 1954 - 2014)

In our prayers of intercession when I say, 'O Lord, hear our prayer', your response is 'When we call, answer us'. Let us pray.

Merciful and Loving God, as we begin our journey through the New Year, we celebrate and give thanks for the beautiful planet upon which we live, but we are not blinded to its fragility and brokenness. We are gravely aware of the huge number of people who suffer as a result of our inability to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, so we turn to you in prayer, asking you to bring healing and wholeness, for although so many situations lie beyond our power, to you all things are possible. Certainly, Lord, we want to seek the well-being of people whose lives touch ours, so we ask you to grant us the courage, faith, steadfastness and compassion we need to bring healing rather than hurt to our neighbours.

O Lord, hear our prayer: **When we call, answer us.**

Unlooked for, Christ comes. To shepherds, watching their sheep through the long, dark night, he comes with the glory of the angels' song and in the humility of the manger. Loving God, we pray for our community: may we answer your call to serve you through the mission of our churches, or by supporting the work done by food banks, street pastors, the Salvation Army and any organization that serves the poor and vulnerable in our society, or by supporting Christian Aid, All We Can and other relief organizations that address the grievous poverty in the Developing World.

We pray for our church, the churches in our area and for the World Church. Guide us to serve our communities and support the poor and disfranchised. Help us to find new ways, to not only preach Good News but to live it day by day; to be a light of hope in a self-centred, sin-darkened world. In the midst of our everyday lives, surprise us with glimpses of the glorious, humble love at the heart of existence.

O Lord, hear our prayer: **When we call, answer us.**

Searched for, Christ comes. To the wise and powerful, star-led to Bethlehem, seeking a king, he comes, child of Mary, crowned with meekness, worthy of every gift. Loving God, we pray that the leaders of the world learn to seek the ways of mercy and justice through which peace may be established, to negotiate and compromise instead of using force against opponents. We pray that the wars in Ukraine and Palestine will soon be ended and, indeed that other conflicts will be resolved. Lord, remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism and oppression and grant them both healing in body, mind and spirit and the help they need to rebuild their lives in hope. Guide our leaders and us with your light to the true wisdom of justice and peace, of freedom and respect for every human life.

O Lord, hear our prayer: **When we call, answer us.**

Longed for, Christ comes. To Anna and Simeon, whose days are lived in faithful expectation, he comes, a new life to the old, a living prophecy of hope. Loving Lord, guide those who govern us and their advisors that they may adopt policies that will bring us safely through these challenging times. Give them the courage and

wisdom, so they do what is right, whether or not it is popular, to eschew self-interest for the wellbeing of all.

Lord, we ask your blessing upon the NHS as it faces the demands of winter and industrial disputes. Provide the resources and leadership it needs to keep us safe and healthy. We pray for care-workers in homes and the community, that they, too, can fulfil their duties and find satisfaction as they do so.

O Lord, hear our prayer: **When we call, answer us.**

Prayed for, Christ comes. To men and women, girls and boys, crying out in darkness, pain and loneliness, he comes, baptized, at one with us, our Saviour, healer and friend. Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for people who are sick in body, mind or spirit, for all who are suffering long-term effects of coronavirus and those who are living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers. May they receive the care and support they need and may they experience your presence in their need, so they find healing, peace of mind, renewed strength and comfort.

We pray for everybody who face unemployment, addictions, broken relationships, loneliness and especially bereavement at a time we usually associate with joyful celebration. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we can offer friendship and practical support to them. In a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help..... Loving Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so they experience your healing, comfort, hope and peace.

O Lord, hear our prayer: **When we call, answer us.**

Unlooked for and searched for, longed for and prayed for, you come to us now as you have come to your people in every age. Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our families and our friends. Fill us with the love and grace of Christ Jesus, so that our thoughts, words and deeds offer peace, light and love to people around us and bring glory to your holy name. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 1 verses 43 to 51

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Amen.

Daniel Shutte, a member of the St. Louis Jesuits in the USA, wrote our next hymn in 1981. He is one of a number of modern Catholic hymn-writers whose works

have an ecumenical appeal. This hymn uses imagery from the call of Isaiah and has become one of our most popular hymns. Hymn number 663, 'I, the Lord of sea and sky,'

**1. I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry;
All who dwell in dark and sin
My hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
I will speak my word to them.**

Whom shall I send? *Chorus:*

Here I am, Lord.

Is it I, Lord?

I have heard you calling in the night.

I will go, Lord,

If you lead me;

I will hold your people in my heart.

**2. I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain;
I have wept for love of them –
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
Give them hearts for love alone;
I will speak my word to them.**

Whom shall I send? *Chorus:*

**3. I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame,
I will set a feast for them –
My hand will save.**

**Finest bread I will provide
Till their hearts are satisfied;
I will give my life to them.**

Whom shall I send? *Chorus:*

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Sermon: 'Come and see.' John 1:46

Are you being called by God, or do you know someone else who has been, but needs to be prompted as I was, years ago? It may not be only a lack of a need to be prompted into answering our call, but scepticism, too. The reading from John's gospel describes the calling of the first five disciples. John the Baptist pointed out Jesus to Andrew and an unnamed follower as 'the Lamb of God'. They immediately followed our Lord and, when he asked them what they wanted, they asked where he was staying. Jesus replied, 'Come, and you will see.' Andrew, of course, relayed the news to his brother, Simon and brought him to Jesus, who renamed him, Cephas, or Peter.

Next day, Jesus sought out Philip, who like Andrew and Peter came from Bethsaida, but this time when Philip tried to recruit his friend, Nathanael, he was faced with scepticism, if not hostility, for Nathanael came from Cana, where Jesus had performed his first miracle and he reacted almost contemptuously to Philip's news that

Jesus came from Nazareth. As a native Brummie, I have experienced the same feelings about the city where I was born and raised and not just in the Black Country either!

There were some reasons for Nathanael's prejudice: Nazareth was a town in Galilee, a province considered unclean by people from Judea, for Galilee had a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles, with Gentiles numerically superior, so whilst most Judeans tried to have as little to do with Gentiles as possible, Galilean Jews had no choice but to mix with their Gentile neighbours. Worse still, Galilee was notorious for producing fanatical zealots and bogus Messiahs, who led insurrections against the occupying Romans with the inevitable bloody suppression and punishment. Jesus' origins thus generated great prejudice in Philip, who asked, 'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?' Philip sought to overcome his prejudice, saying simply, 'Come and see.'

There is a saying that seeing is believing – unless you are watching an illusionist like Paul Daniels, or David Copperfield, so despite his prejudice, Nathanael took the first step to discipleship by going to find out what kind of person Philip's Messiah really was. He must have been surprised by the way in which Jesus greeted him, as a man blessed by God – the meaning of a true or faithful Israelite – besides an honest one. His enquiry how Jesus knew him provoked a reply that must have surely astounded him: 'I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree before Philip called you.' In other words, Jesus already knew that Nathanael had been studying the Scriptures and probably was praying about and seeking the longed – for Messiah some time before Philip had called him. Nathanael realised such knowledge was more than could have been known by a normal human being. He reasoned, therefore, that Jesus must be the Christ! In astonishment, Nathanael declared that Jesus truly was the 'Son of God' and 'the King of Israel', both of which were terms used for the Messiah. All his scepticism dissolved as he accepted discipleship, yet Jesus told him that, although he had been impressed by what he had revealed about him, through his discipleship he would see much greater things, for Jesus would reveal himself as the link between mankind and heaven.

This reading has two messages for us, the first of which is that, like Philip, we should be persistent if someone with whom we try to share the Good News is sceptical or difficult to engage. We should not go to the extreme of being importunate and a nuisance, but quietly encourage them to find out the truth for themselves, as much by the way in which we care for them and for those around us, as by reading part of the Gospels with them, or by encouraging them to attend a Bible study group or a church service. After all, actions speak louder than words and, depending on the way we let the light of God's love shine through our lives, each of us is the best advert for our faith – or the worst. No one is going to want to follow Christ if we are the sour-faced, prickly, self-righteous prigs that some television programmes portray Christians: instead, we should try to live with integrity, yet with the same humility as Jesus, not considering ourselves as better than our neighbours, but doing what the early Methodists did; supporting them and encouraging them to seek a more fulfilled – Christ-filled – way of life.

I have no doubt that some people will continue to maintain that Jesus was a great philosopher, an exceptional prophet and healer, but no more than that. If that was the case, why should anybody choose to die such a terrible, cursed death to save you or me? Would we choose to do so? Others may argue that there was no resurrection, in which case why did so many followers claim to have seen the risen Christ, when such a declaration would probably result in their death at the hands of the Roman State, during the period when Christianity was banned throughout the Empire? Some people may be willing to live a lie; some will give their life defending a cherished truth, but who will

willingly die for an untruth? Moreover, had Jesus not been raised from the dead, why would the disheartened, dull-witted followers, who had deserted our Lord in his hour of need, have declared his resurrection? What would they have gained? Without the resurrection, Jesus' ministry would have ended as an inglorious failure and he would have been forgotten. Instead, his name blazes bright two thousand years later – it is even recognised, if opposed, in other faiths and even in secular societies. Why should a low-born Jew from an obscure district in Palestine, who died as a common criminal, be remembered two millennia later – unless, of course, he really is the Son of God?

Do we give up too easily when we are faced by doubt or prejudice? Jesus certainly did not, even when that prejudice led to his death at Calvary. Don't forget that when Thomas doubted the resurrection, Jesus showed him his wounds – that he might see the truth for himself. Do not be shy to share our faith, especially with friends who may not know Jesus, just because we fear we may drive them away, or they'll scoff at our beliefs.

The second message is that Jesus' call is not a one-day-only offer. If you do not respond at once, he won't give up on you. I know from personal experience. Your call may not be accompanied by pealing bells, thunder and lightning or fireworks, or anything as dramatic! Mine was a quiet, persistent voice, challenging and yet gentle until that sharp prod by Sister Jane Day when she challenged me on Christmas Morning, 1993! Don't allow prejudice to deafen you to Christ's call and, if you are uncertain whether or not Jesus is calling you, follow Philip's simple advice: 'Come and see.' Amen.

We close our worship with another hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule, which is sung to "Kelvingrove". Hymn number 673, 'Will you come and follow me'.

1. Will you come and follow me

If I but call your name?

Will you go where you don't know

And never be the same?

Will you let my love be shown,

Will you let my name be known,

Will you let my life be grown

In you, and you in me?

2. Will you leave yourself behind

If I but call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind

And never be the same?

Will you risk the hostile stare

Should your life attract or scare,

Will you let me answer prayer

In you, and you in me?

3. Will you let the blinded see

If I but call your name?

Will you set the pris'ners free,

And never be the same?

Will you kiss the leper clean

And do such as this unseen,

And admit to what I mean

In you, and you in me?

4. Will you love the 'you' you hide

If I but call your name?

**Will you quell the fear inside,
And never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
To reshape the world around
Through my sight and touch and sound
In you, and you in me?**

**5. Lord, your summons echoes true
When you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you,
And never be the same.
In your company I'll go
Where your love and footsteps show.
Thus, I'll move and live and grow
In you, and you in me.**

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Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all now and forever more. Amen.