

A service for 11th February, 2024 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 67 verses 1 to 4

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth. Amen.

We open our worship with a hymn written by Charles Wesley in 1740 and considered one of his finest hymns by James Montgomery. It was called “A Morning Hymn” by the Wesleys and for a while was believed to have been written by Augustus Toplady, who had a long feud with John Wesley. ‘Christ, whose glory fills the skies’. Hymn number 134.

**1. Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
Christ, the true, the only Light,
Sun of Righteousness, arise,
Triumph o’er the shades of night;
Day-spring from on high, be near;
Day-star, in my heart appear.**

**2. Dark and cheerless is the morn
Unaccompanied by thee:
Joyless is the day’s return,
Till thy mercy’s beams I see,
Till they inward light impart,
Glad my eyes and warm my heart.**

**3. Visit then this soul of mine;
Pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
Fill me, radiancy divine;
Scatter all my unbelief;
More and more thyself display,
Shining to the perfect day.**

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

Let us pray.

Almighty God, Maker of the universe, Source of all living things, your glory shines through your creation. We have come to worship and adore you with humble, joyful hearts, for sinful though we are, we know you are always seeking to draw us close to you, to heal our brokenness and feed us with your love. Help us to set aside all distractions and anxieties, so we may receive your blessings as we sing your praises joyfully, pray to you in trust and humbly receive your holy word, for we know that you alone are worthy of all honour, glory, praise and power.

Heavenly Father, thank you for all the blessings we receive from you: our lives, people who have guided, inspired and cared for us; experiences and challenges that have brought us pleasure and fulfilment, but most of all for your undying grace, revealed through the life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, your Son, our Saviour, who has freed us from the power of sin and death.

Amazing God, you did all this for us and yet as we consider your holiness, we are aware that, despite our efforts to live as you call us to, we still fall short of what we ought to be. Merciful Lord forgive us for failing to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, for times when our discipleship is half-hearted and occasions when we do

and say things that offend or hurt other people. Help us to change our sinful ways and pardon us in Jesus' holy name.

God most gracious and holy, you hear and answer our prayers and you throw open your arms to embrace us with forgiveness. Therefore, as we have been freed from the burden of our guilt, may we respond to your grace by answering Christ's call to serve him, faithfully and joyfully, so we may glorify you in his holy name. Amen.

We say the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples...

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.

We continue our worship with a hymn written by Thomas Troeger, professor of Christian communication at Yale Divinity school and a minister in both the Presbyterian and Episcopal Churches of the USA. Hymn number 260, 'Swiftly pass the clouds of glory,' which is best sung to "Bethany" Singing the Faith number 110.

**1. Swiftly pass the clouds of glory,
Heaven's voice, the dazzling light;
Moses and Elijah vanish;
Christ alone commands the height!
Peter, James, and John fall silent,
Turning from the summit's rise
Downward toward the shadowed valley
Where their Lord has fixed his eyes.**

**2. Glimpsed and gone the revelation,
They shall gain and keep its truth,
Not by building on the mountain
Any shrine or sacred booth,
But by following the Saviour
Through the valley to the cross
And by testing faith's resilience
Through betrayal, pain, and loss.**

**3. Lord, transfigure our perception
With the purest light that shines,
And recast our life's intentions
To the shape of your designs,
Till we seek no other glory
Than what lies past Calvary's hill
And our living and our dying
And our rising by your will.**

© Thomas Troeger (Born 1945)

In our prayers of intercession when I say, 'Your kingdom come', your response is 'Your will be done'. Let us pray.

Most gracious and amazing God, we rejoice in this beautiful, wonderful planet on which we live and in your sustaining grace. However, we are aware of the suffering of neighbours both nearby and further afield, more often than not as a result of human pride, selfishness, cruelty, avarice or indifference. We recognize that you have blessed

us throughout our lives and so we ask you to help us to play our part to heal some of the world's brokenness, however small our role may be. We know, too, that our powers are limited, so many situations are far beyond our powers to remedy, but they are not beyond yours.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

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 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 Circuit and the World Church. Guide us how best to serve our communities and 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.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done**

Heavenly Father, we pray for peace to be established in the world, for an end to fighting in Ukraine and Palestine in particular, besides peaceful resolutions to disputes between other countries before they escalate into wars. Teach national leaders to seek the ways of mercy and justice through which peace may be established, to negotiate and compromise instead of using force against opponents. Lord, remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism and oppression. Grant them the support they need to rebuild their lives, as well as healing in body, mind and spirit.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Lord of power and might, guide those who govern us and their advisors to adopt policies that will bring us safely through these challenging times and meeting the needs of vulnerable groups. Give them the courage and wisdom, so they do what is right, whether or not it is popular, to set aside 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 both homes and the community, that they, too, can fulfil their duties and find satisfaction in doing so.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for people who are sick in body, mind or spirit, for all who are 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 comfort and strength.

We pray for everybody who faces unemployment, addictions, broken relationships, loneliness and especially bereavement. 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..... Faithful Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so they experience your healing, hope and lasting peace.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

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 both friends and strangers and bring glory to your holy name. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 9 verses 2 to 9

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His

clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus,

“Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud:

“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Amen.

We continue our worship with the hymn, ‘Transfigured Christ, none comprehends’. It was written in 1991 by Alan Gaunt, a URC minister from Manchester. Hymn number 261.

1. Transfigured Christ, none comprehends

**Your majesty, whose splendour stuns
All waking souls; whose light transcends
The brightness of a thousand suns!**

**2. You stand with Moses on the hill,
You speak of your new exodus:
The way through death, you will fulfil
By dying helpless on the cross.**

**3. You stand here with Elijah, too,
By whom the still small voice was heard:
And you, yourself, will prove God true,
Made mute in death, Incarnate Word.**

**4. If we could bear your brightness here
And stay for ever in your light,
Then we would conquer grief and fear,
And scorn the terrors of the night.**

**5. But, from the heights, you bring us down,
To share earth’s agonies with you,
Where piercing thorns are made your crown
And death, accepted, proves love true.**

**6. Majestic Christ, God’s well-loved Son,
If we must share your grief and loss,
Transfigure us, when all is done,
With glory shining from your cross.**

© Alan Gaunt (born 1935)

Sermon: *The Transfiguration* Mark 9: 2 – 9

Shalom Chaverim! Brothers and sisters, may God’s full blessing be granted you today and always. You ask who I am? Let me introduce myself. I am James Barzebedee, brother of John and follower of the Way, a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gentiles around Galilee sometimes call me Jacobus, but John and I are nicknamed the ‘Boanerges’, or ‘Sons of Thunder’, by the other disciples because we are passionate by nature and like to be heard! I’m here because the hopeless preacher was at a loss to explain what happened on that mountain near the Sea of Galilee seven days after our friend and partner, Simon Peter, declared Jesus to be the Christ, God’s Anointed One.

I'm not surprised, for what Peter, John and I saw was so remarkable that we daren't tell anybody until much later, for no one would have believed us!

It had been a confusing week, for Peter had hardly made his declaration when our Master told us that he would be rejected by the religious Establishment, would be killed and would rise from the dead three days later. This talk seemed madness, for we expected that the Messiah would be the warrior king from Isaiah 63, driving our Roman occupiers from our land, his clothes crimson with their blood. He was going to be another King David, a financial wizard who'd restore our economy to greatness, a leader who would compel us to return to faithful worship of the Lord, Elohim. Our Master's talk of suffering and death did not fit in with our ideas of the Messiah, but when Peter protested, he was firmly rebuked for holding onto human and not kingdom values. Peter was rather tetchy for the next few days and we kept quiet lest we upset either our Master, or Peter.

We were surprised then, when Jesus took us up the mountain, because he was going to pray and we expected him to prefer to be alone. We stood there as he bowed down on the summit, with Mount Tabor, some distance away to the west. We had just begun to pray when, suddenly, the Master's clothes became so white they were radiant – light seemed to shine from them: this was no trick of the light – the shining came from within the Lord, not externally! It was painful to look at our Master, but look we did, for two figures seemed to appear from nowhere, joining the Lord and talking with him. We recognised one from his plain camel-hair garment as Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, for everybody had wondered whether or not John the Baptizer was Elijah returned to the world and there was more than a passing resemblance, but the Baptizer was dead, butchered by Herod Antipas at Herodias' behest. The other figure used the word 'exodus' as he talked about the Master's departure at Jerusalem, so the three of us simultaneously realised that he was Moses, the agent of Israel's departure from Egypt and the bringer of Torah, or the Law to our people. We knew both patriarchs had met God on a mountain in the Scriptures, so it was appropriate that they should also meet Jesus 'in glorious splendour'.

We stood at a distance, hardly daring to breathe: Jesus, our friend, was conversing with the two principal figures in Judaism: Elijah and Moses, yet they were clearly deferential to him, which means Jesus is greater than the Torah or the teaching of the prophets which could only mean he is the Son of God! As we struggled to take this in, Peter decided to speak on our behalf, more in terror than anything – he just couldn't keep quiet. "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." He told me later that he wanted time to understand what was going on, to hold onto the glorious moment indefinitely.

Such a hope was not to be, for we were instantly enveloped by a cloud – the Shekinah- cloud – from which the Almighty spoke: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" The three of us were so terrified, we fell face downward, hardly daring to move in God's presence, for it was said that anybody who saw God would perish. I don't know how long we were lying there, but suddenly Jesus tapped our shoulders and bade us not to be afraid. We did as we were told, but as we looked up, we saw that Elijah and Moses had disappeared.

The four of us descended from the summit to our friends below. As we did so, our Master told us not to tell anybody what we had seen until he had risen from the dead. We did not really need to be told, for who'd have believed us? We didn't have long to reflect on what we'd experienced on the mountain top, for even before we reached the

bottom, we saw the other disciples engaged in a fierce argument with Scribes, because they could not heal an epileptic boy and our Lord had to call out the evil from the youth, besides rebuking the scoffers. Our moment of wonder was lost in the turmoil of worldly demands, but we recalled it later and learned from it.

The three of us had seen Jesus in all his glory – as God’s Son – as the Christ foretold by the prophets. Like Peter, we had wanted to cling onto that moment, but we were called back to the world as it is, to fulfil our discipleship, our resolve reinforced because we know Jesus is the true Saviour of all – doubts set aside. Oh, my friends, I know you will ask why we let our Master down in the Garden of Gethsemane if we had no doubts – and the answer is simple and shameful: we were caught off balance and lost our nerve – which is why Christ sent us the Ruach, the Holy Spirit, for none of us can hope to succeed if we try to work in our own strength.

Whether or not you have had a mountain-top revelation about the true nature of my Lord Jesus, be assured that just as Moses led his people to freedom from slavery in Egypt, so Christ Jesus leads all who will follow to freedom from slavery to sin. Peter, John and I knew that our Master’s declaration of his passion, death and resurrection would surely happen, though we did not understand its significance until the Pentecost experience, when the Spirit taught us that Jesus was the one perfect sacrifice for all sin. No longer do we have to try to earn God’s forgiveness and favour through works, for we are saved by God’s grace and through Jesus we are assured that he loves us to the uttermost. That means we are free to serve him as friends, or co-workers, not as slaves, so let us love and care for our neighbours as willingly as our Master did, not because we are obliged to, but as a response to God’s agape – boundless, sacrificial redemptive love for sinners like us.

Chaverim, brothers and sisters in Christ, let our service be faithful and cheerful. Let everybody we meet see the love of Christ in our lives, for unless they do so, they won’t accept the Good News which will lead them to our Master’s side. Shabbat shalom! Amen.

We close our worship with a hymn by Jacqueline Jones that challenges us. Jacqui is a contemporary Christian singer-songwriter, originally from South Africa, who was based in the UK for 5 years and now lives in Christchurch, NZ as a vicar's wife! Hymn number 662, ‘Have you heard God’s voice; has your heart been stirred?’

1. Have you heard God’s voice; has your heart been stirred?

Are you still prepared to follow?

**Have you made a choice to remain and serve,
Though the way be rough and narrow? *Chorus:***

***Will you walk the path that will cost you much
And embrace the pain and sorrow?***

Will you trust in One who entrusts to you

The disciples of tomorrow?

2. Will you use your voice; will you not sit down

When the multitudes are silent?

**Will you make a choice to stand your ground
When the crowds are turning violent? *Chorus:***

3. In your city streets will you be God’s heart?

Will you listen to the voiceless?

**Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start,
Will you share your faith with the faithless? *Chorus:***

**4. Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith
And believe it could be different?**

Will you share your views using words of grace?

Will you leave a thoughtful imprint? *Chorus:*

We will walk the path that will cost us much

And embrace the pain and sorrow.

We will trust in One who entrusts to us

The disciples of tomorrow.

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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.