

A service for 17th March, 2024 Lent 5 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 25 verses 4 and 5

Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Carl Boberg, in Sweden during 1885 after a tremendous thunderstorm, followed by a rainbow and the peal of church bells. It was adopted by churches in Germany, was taken to Russia and was discovered by a Salvation Army missionary serving in Ukraine. Stuart Keene Hine adapted and translated Revd. Boberg's hymn, but at the end of the Second World War, he was forced to return to the UK where he worked amongst refugees. He sent copies of his hymn to refugees in New Zealand and they like it so much they sent it to Billy Graham in the USA. The rest is history! Hymn number 82, 'How great thou art!'

1. O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder

Consider all the works Thy hand hath made,

I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,

Thy power throughout the universe displayed: *Chorus*

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,

How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,

How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

2. When through the woods and forest glades I wander

And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;

When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur

And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze: *Chorus*

3. And when I think that God His Son not sparing,

Sent Him to die – I scarce can take it in.

That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,

He bled and died to take away my sin. *Chorus*

4. When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation

And take me home – what joy shall fill my heart!

Then I shall bow in humble adoration

And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art! *Chorus*

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Let us pray

Saviour God, we are here to worship and adore you on the first Sunday of the Passion, as we remember how your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, gave his life to break us free from the shackles of sin. Next week, we shall share the joy of his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, before we lament at his rejection, betrayal, passion and death. However, we know that wasn't the end of the story, for when our Lord was raised from the tomb, he triumphed over both sin and death for our sakes. Therefore, gracious God, today we come to acknowledge you boundless, everlasting grace. Amazing God, we know that you are the True Light who guides us on our way: you are the path to life in all its fullness; you are holy and wonderful and to you alone belong all glory, honour power and praise.

Thank you, Lord for the many blessings you have granted us throughout our lives: for all you have done for us, accomplished in us and given us. God of boundless power,

your love for sinners like us is beyond our understanding, for although we try to live as you desire, we know that we fail both to love our neighbours as we love ourselves and to serve and love you wholeheartedly. Help us turn away from sin and forgive us in Jesus' name.

Gracious, loving God, we believe you hear all prayers and that you have already forgiven us. Therefore, merciful Lord, teach us to serve you as you desire, so that, by loving and helping others joyfully and faithfully, we may honour your holy Name, through Christ Jesus, our Saviour. 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, was written by Graham for 'Spring Harvest' in 1984 and reminds us that Jesus came to serve and love us, not to lord it over us. We shall sing hymn number 272, 'The Servant King'

**1. From heaven You came,
Helpless babe, entered our world,
Your glory veiled; not to be served
But to serve and give Your life
That we might live. *Chorus:***

***This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the Servant King.***

**2. There in the garden of tears,
My heavy load he chose to bear;
His heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not My will but Yours,' He said. *Chorus:***

**3. Come see His hands and His feet,
The scars that speak of sacrifice ;
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered. *Chorus:***

**4. So let us learn how to serve,
And in our lives enthrone Him;
Each other's needs to prefer,
For it is Christ we're serving. *Chorus:***

© Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

We come to our prayers for people nearby and far off. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy,' please respond with 'Hear our prayer'. Let us pray.

Sovereign God, you created a beautiful, self-sustaining world in which all people should thrive; you have blessed us not only with intelligence but a sense of right and wrong, yet when we watch the news on television, or read our newspapers, we are confronted by the brokenness and suffering on our planet, often caused by human pride, greed, selfishness, cruelty, foolishness and, worst of all, indifference. Therefore, we turn to you in prayer, asking that you will bring healing and wholeness to people who are suffering, for although so many situations lie beyond our power, to you all things are possible.

Nevertheless, help us to serve you as you call us to, so we may play our part in making the world a better place.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord of Shalom, we pray for real peace in the world, for an end to conflicts that cause so much harm and suffering. Warm the hearts of national leaders, so they govern with justice and mercy, the source of peace. Teach them to negotiate and compromise, rather than using violence to achieve their aims. We pray for a just ending to the fighting in Ukraine and Palestine, especially and we remember victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and persecution, including those forced to become refugees. May they receive the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

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 to find healing, comfort and renewed strength, besides experiencing your presence in their need, so they find hope and peace.

We pray for everybody who is in need, or trouble, for the lonely and bereaved. In a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help..... Help us to be sensitive to the needs of those for whom we pray, so we can provide practical support and we pray that you will enfold them in the warmth of your love, which offers healing, hope, courage and enduring peace.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, help us play what part we can to build a society where we stand up against poverty, here and abroad, where we desire justice for all-comers and always seek the common good; a world where we are willing to work together in mutual trust and to share justly the earth's resources, rather than fighting over them.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our church, the churches in our Circuit and, indeed, 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. Moreover, grant us the faith and courage to make difficult, possibly painful decisions to help us move forwards as the body of Christ.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our families and friends. Protect us, our families and friends against harm, help us to resist the temptation to sin, granting that we share the abundance of love Jesus has given us with all comers, so we live out the Gospel message and bring you glory in his holy name. Amen.

The Gospel reading is John chapter 12 verses 20 to 33

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request.

“Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. Jesus replied,

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"

Then a voice came from heaven,

"I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. Amen.

The New Testament reading is Revelation chapter 21 verses 1 to 7, headed 'The New Jerusalem'.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with human beings, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said,

"I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To those who are thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who overcome will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. Amen.

We continue our worship with hymn written originally by Dean George Kitchin for a festival at Winchester Cathedral in 1887 number. It was modified and had the original verses reduced by half by Michael Newbolt, a Canon at Chester Cathedral. We shall sing number 276, 'Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim'.

Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim

Till all the world adore his sacred name.

1. Follow the path on which our Captain trod

Our King victorious, Christ the Son of God: *Chorus:*

2. Each new-born soldier of the Crucified

Bears on his brow the seal of him who died: *Chorus:*

3. Led on their way by this triumphant sign,

The hosts of God in conquering ranks combine: *Chorus:*

4. From farthest regions let them homage bring,

And on his cross adore their Saviour King: *Chorus:*

5. O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree,

As thou hast promised, draw the world to thee: *Chorus:*

6. Set up thy throne, that earth's despair may cease

Beneath the shadow of its healing peace: *Chorus:*

© *M.R. Newbolt (1874 – 1956) // G.W. Kitchen (1827 – 1912)*

Sermon: *"It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End."* Rev. 21:6

The writer of Revelation, John, was an early Christian, who was exiled on the island of Patmos because of his faith. His Letter is believed to have been written between 81 and

96 AD, during the reign of Emperor Domitian. Revelation is a difficult letter as it is apocalyptic – effectively looking at the big picture of human history to encourage persecuted followers in times of severe persecution. As in the Book of Daniel, written five hundred years before Christ, but which has visions of the future, Revelation is full of vivid imagery and coded messages, in John's case used to stop Romans understanding the nature of his message. At first sight, the reading may seem a strange choice for Passion Sunday, but I shall try to connect the reading from the apostle John with the closing chapters of John of Patmos' Letter.

Our gospel reading follows Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover and his passion, death and resurrection. Shortly beforehand, he had raised his friend, Lazarus, four days after he had died, showing that he had power over life and death, power possessed only by God. Many who witnessed this believed, but the Sanhedrin, the religious establishment, still refused to accept him as the Messiah, and fearing that he would lead an insurrection against Rome, actively plotted his death.

Some Greeks, asked Philip, whose name was Greek, to be taken to see Jesus, in other words, they were asking to be able to follow Christ. When Andrew and Philip told Jesus, he declared, **"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed."** He knew that his ministry was reaching its climax and that his suffering, crucifixion and resurrection was imminent. Although fully human and divine, Jesus shared our fear of suffering and death. Momentarily, he wondered whether or not to plead with the Almighty to be freed from what was to come, but his love for fallen humanity gave him the resolve to cry, **'Father, glorify your name!'** an echo of his 'Not my will but yours' in the Garden of Gethsemane. John asserted that God affirmed his glorification, then Jesus declared,

'Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.' In other words, Christ was saying that the coming events would break Satan's power and his crucifixion would draw all people to himself – not just an elite or chosen race. Those Gentiles who had sought him out show that anybody who turn to Christ will be saved. Salvation is offered to everybody. The events of Jesus' passion to his resurrection atoned for all the sins of the world and broke Satan's hold over human beings.

You may ask why, if this is true, there is so much sin, suffering and brokenness in the world today. John of Patmos offers us an understanding of this conundrum. In the chapters preceding our reading from Revelation, there is a vision of a woman clothed with the sun, representing Israel, persecuted by a malevolent red dragon, Satan, who wants to destroy the child she is about to bear. This child, Jesus, is snatched up to heaven, safe from the dragon and a mighty battle breaks out between Satan and his minions with the archangel St. Michael and the angels. In this battle Satan and his followers are defeated and cast from heaven to earth.

Although he had been defeated, Satan was not destroyed immediately, but he was aware that it would only be a matter of time before he would be. In furious rage, Satan tried, but failed to destroy the woman clothed with the sun, or Israel, so he turned his attention to her other children, the Church. Like the threshing of a dying monster, Satan tried and is still striving to destroy the faith of the faithful, to break the resolve of Christians. In Revelation John of Patmos was trying to encourage his contemporaries facing persecution, exile, suffering and martyrdom that Christ has the victory and God's kingdom is a reality, now, not at some distant point in the future.

Though the world in which we live is riven with wars, poverty, cruelty and faithlessness, the ultimate victory belongs to Christ and if we maintain our faithful living we shall find the fullness of God's shalom: peace, harmony, wellbeing, prosperity and God's complete blessing. Tyrants will rise and fall, as they have done throughout history. Empires, too, will wax and wane. Despite the threats posed by the likes of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, we ought not lose faith, but continue to lead Christ-centred lives, for the Lord will uphold us and strengthen us, while Jesus' promise of new life should comfort us as well. God is in control, even when he seems to be absent in our troubles. That cry from the crucified Jesus, '**Eloi, Elio, lama sabachthani?**' or '**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**' was far more than a cry of despair, for Jesus was reciting the opening of Psalm 22 which ended with the vindication and restoration of the Suffering Servant. Jews would often quote the opening of a Psalm, intending listeners to understand its full meaning. Even amid his suffering, Christ knew that he had triumphed over sin and death. He had fulfilled his Father's plan for our salvation and inaugurated a new covenant where we are close enough to God to be able to call him, Abba, Daddy!

The connection between our readings is the love of God for everyone, his desire to draw us close, as well as the price of his redemptive love: love that took Jesus to Calvary, but which also raised him from the tomb. Nevertheless, it would be too easy to allow current events to undermine us, just as the Great War and the Second World War undermined the faith of many – especially combatants and victims of those terrible wars. Sometimes it is hard to see the light of God's love shining through the darkness of sin and selfishness in our world, so it is all the more important for us to represent Christ's love-light with random acts of kindness in words and actions – offering practical support to people we encounter who are in need or pain, as well as resisting worldly temptations which can lead us away from Christ. The New Jerusalem shows God dwelling with his people, but remember, God's kingdom lives within each of us through his Spirit and we are called to reveal kingdom values in our daily lives. May She, the Spirit, be our counsellor and comfort through the trials of life and may She keep us true in our discipleship, for the sake of our Saviour. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by the Father of English hymnody, Isaac Watts, 317 years ago. Its words are majestic and take us to the foot of the cross. "See from his head, his hands, his feet, / Sorrow and love flow mingled down; / Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, / Or thorns compose so rich a crown?" I rate this hymn as probably the finest of all hymns. We shall sing hymn number 287, 'When I survey the wondrous cross'.

**1. When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.**

**2. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.**

**3. See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?**

4. His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er his body on the tree;
Then am I dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

5. Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

© *Isaac Watts {1674 – 1748}*

Benediction

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