

## A service for 18<sup>th</sup> February, 2024 (StF) Lent 1

### Call to Worship: Psalm 25 verses 4 to 6

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. Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Amen.

*We shall sing a hymn written by David Evans in 1985, which was his reaction to some contemporary worship songs which he felt were over-familiar to the Lord. It is also a hymn to use if your church has a number of over-excited children present! We shall sing hymn number 20, "Be still, for the presence of the Lord."*

**1. Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here;**

**Come bow before Him now with reverence and fear.**

**In Him no sin is found, we stand on holy ground;**

**Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here.**

**2. Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around;**

**He burns with holy fire, with splendour He is crowned.**

**How awesome is the sight, our radiant King of light;**

**Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.**

**3. Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place;**

**He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister His grace.**

**No work too hard for Him, in faith receive from Him;**

**Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place. © David J. Evans**

### ***Let us pray.***

Almighty God, we come to you with reverence and awe, for you are the Living Word who created the universe and every living thing within it. You are holy and glorious in every way and we rejoice in the beauty and complexity of your creation. Your might is as boundless as your love, for sinful though we are, you seek to draw us close to you, to heal our brokenness and feed us with your love. You shared our mortal frame as Christ Jesus, not only to teach us how you want us to live by words and works of love, nor to reveal your true nature and purpose, but to redeem us by his death and resurrection. May we use this season of Lent to refresh our discipleship and grow in faith.

Heavenly Father, thank you for all the good things we receive from you: for people who have guided us, inspired us, loved and cared for us; for experiences and opportunities that have brought us pleasure and fulfilment, for challenges that have tested us and shaped our character, but most of all for your undying grace, revealed through Christ Jesus, without whom we are helpless and hopeless. May our worship be acceptable to you, for we offer it in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

***In our prayer of confession, when I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'hear our prayer'.***

Heavenly Father, thank you for the good things we receive from you: our lives, our work and rest, for people who have guided us, inspired us and cared for us; for experiences and challenges that have brought us pleasure and fulfilment, but most of all for your undying grace, revealed through Christ Jesus, your Son, our Saviour.

Amazing God, as we consider your holiness, we know that, despite our efforts to live as you call us to, we still fall short of what we ought to be. Merciful Lord, we confess

that we often fail to love and serve you wholeheartedly and show by our words and deeds that we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

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

We confess, too, there are times when our discipleship is half-hearted and occasions when we ignore your call. Help us to turn from self-centred to Christ-centred lives and pardon us in Jesus' holy name.

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

Gracious God, you hear and answer our prayers and open your arms to embrace us with forgiveness. As we have been freed from the burden of guilt, may we respond to your grace by loving and serving you and our neighbours, faithfully and joyfully, so we may honour 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 translation of a hymn by Charles Coffin, an Eighteenth Century rector of the University of Paris. It was translated by Revd. John Chandler, vicar of Whitley, in Oxfordshire and included in his hymnal, "The Hymns of the Primitive Church" during 1837. Hymn number 182, 'On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry'*

**1. On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry**

**Announces that the Lord is nigh;  
Awake and hearken, for he brings  
Glad tidings of the King of kings!**

**2. Then cleansed be every Christian breast,**

**And furnished for so great a guest!  
Yea, let us each our heart prepare  
For Christ to come and enter there.**

**3. For thou art our salvation, Lord,**

**Our refuge, and our great reward;  
Without thy grace we waste away  
Like flowers that wither and decay.**

**4. To heal the sick stretch out thy hand,**

**And bid the fallen sinner stand;  
Shine forth, and let thy light restore  
Earth's own true loveliness once more.**

**5. All praise, eternal Son, to thee**

**Whose advent sets thy people free;  
Whom, with the Father, we adore,  
And Holy Spirit evermore.**

© Charles Coffin {1676 – 1749} Tr. John Chandler {1806 – 1876}

***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 as well as in your sustaining grace. However, we are aware of the world's brokenness, 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 in heal some of the world's brokenness, however small our role may be. We know, too, that while our powers are limited, no situation is beyond yours, so we ask you to intervene when the best we have to offer is insufficient.

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

We pray for our church, the churches in the area 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.

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. 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 courage and 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 courage and wisdom to 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 all safe and healthy. We pray for care-workers in both homes and the community, that they, too, can fulfil their duties, ease the pressures on the NHS by reducing bed-blocking and that they find satisfaction in their work.

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 renewed 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 receive healing, hope and enduring 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 Old Testament reading is Genesis chapter 9 verses 8 to 17**

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him:

“I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth.

I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

And God said,

“This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”

So God said to Noah,

“This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.” Amen.

### **Today’s Gospel reading is Mark chapter 1 verses 9 to 15**

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven:

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

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 is near. Repent and believe the good news!” Amen.

*Our next hymn was published in the “Penny Post” in March 1856 and adapted by Revd. Francis Pott for his book, “Hymns to the Order of Common Prayer” in 1861, since when it has become almost a default Lenten hymn. Hymn number 236, ‘Forty days and forty nights’*

#### **1. Forty days and forty nights**

**You were fasting in the wild;**

**Forty days and forty nights**

**Tempted still, yet undefiled.**

#### **2. Sunbeams scorching day by day;**

**Chilly dewdrops nightly shed;**

**Prowling beasts about your way;**

**Stones your pillow, earth your bed.**

#### **3. Shall not we your sorrow share**

**Learn your discipline of will,**

**And, like you, by fast and prayer**

**Wrestle with the powers of ill?**

#### **4. What if Satan, vexing sore,**

**Flesh and spirit shall assail?**

**You, his vanquisher before,**

**Will not suffer us to fail.**

#### **5. Watching, praying, struggling thus,**

**Vict'ry ours at last shall be;  
Angels minister to us  
As they ministered to thee.**

© *George Smyttan (1822 – 70) & Francis Pott (1832 – 1909)*

**Sermon: *God's Covenants of love***

The story of Noah is a typical rabbinical teaching story, rather than an historical record. It is a lesson about God's nature and his wishes for all human beings, although the story may have been based upon a dreadful flood that killed many people. Let us look at the story, part by part, to see what it is trying to teach us. To begin with Noah was a man who trusted God and obeyed his wishes – even to the point where he built the ark, even though it was too far from the river, or the sea to sail. His neighbours must have thought he'd gone mad, so instead of trying to find out why Noah was making a huge boat, they laughed at him.

The Bible tells us that God was so angry about the sinfulness of other human beings – they stole, attacked and even killed one another – he decided to start life on earth again with Noah's family and two of every animal, all crammed into the ark. When I was little, I wondered why lions and hyenas didn't kill half the other creatures on board, because I took the story as an historical fact, not a lesson about how much evil angers God. The story-teller shows that, even though the way human beings were behaving tempted God to wipe out every living thing once and for all, his love for us led him to give us another chance. It was a little like my son, Andrew, who when he was six or seven said he wanted to join the police, so he could 'shoot the baddies' – I suppose to make the world a better place. My wife and I did explain that this isn't quite the way to make the world a better place, but it took a while for him to see our point of view!

At the end of the flood, God made a covenant, or agreement, between himself and all living beings in which he promised never to destroy life on such a scale again, and blessed Noah and his family. This shows God's love for people like us is so great that even when we go astray, he offers us a chance to return to him – and if we do he will forgive us. You may ask why the rainbow is the sign he chose for his covenant: well, it only appears when rain is falling somewhere, but in the Middle East it is seen more rarely than in this country and like most people they think rainbows are beautiful. Therefore, a colourful sign in the sky is a good way for all of us to remember that God loves us and, even though we don't always live as he wants us to, he wants us to be his holy people, too!

Our reading from Mark's gospel has been chosen for the first Sunday in Lent, because, like the story of Noah, it shows us how much God loves us. Mark was writing for people who knew that Jesus had been put to death on a cross, but who still needed to understand that he was the Son of God, both a human being and God in one person. In our reading, we are told how Jesus began his ministry to the world by being baptised in the River Jordan by his cousin, John the Baptist.

Baptism was unusual for Jews, but John used it to represent the washing away of people's sins, so they might have a new start with God. However, Jesus was baptised even though he had never sinned, probably for two reasons: to mark the start of his ministry – leaving behind his work as a carpenter to take Good News to the world; to acknowledge that he is not only divine, but also human, which was an important point for Mark to make to early Christians. Jesus is not just a good man, or a prophet; he is God's Son, fully human and fully God.

Mark's description of God declaring, "**You are my Son, whom I love, and I am very pleased with you,**" and the image of the Holy Spirit coming down on Jesus like a dove, is meant more as a symbol, rather than a literal event. Clearly, it was at this point

that Jesus received God's blessing to take the Good News to the world and it was when he received the power of the Spirit to carry out his task, but the most important point is that here we have the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, united as Jesus set off on his mission to save the world.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not describe the temptations of Jesus in detail, saying simply, '**Then the Spirit sent Jesus into the desert. He was in the desert forty days and was tempted by Satan**'. Jesus was tempted to misuse his holy power for his own benefit, but would not be deflected from his task to do his Father's will. Jesus could have become famous, wealthy or powerful, had he used his powers wrongly, but he loves us all far more than anything the world can offer. If you take nothing else from our services at Lent and Easter, just remember this: God, who gave human beings a new start after the Great Flood, loves us so much that he sent his Only Son, Jesus, to die and be raised so sinners like us can have a new start – and new life after our days on earth come to an end. God was giving us a new, improved covenant, or agreement, in which we can become his holy people, with our sins forgiven, free to love him and serve other people because we choose to, rather than because we have to, in order to win his favour.

Mark tells us that Jesus began to preach in Galilee after John the Baptist had been arrested by King Herod Antipas, because John's work, preparing the way for the Messiah, had come to an end. Now was the time for Jesus to take the Gospel message to the world. Jesus' message was, "**The right time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Change your hearts and lives and believe the Good News!**" He used a Hebrew word for '**Change your hearts and lives**', which some Bibles translate as **Repent**. The Hebrew **Shub** means to turn right around, from sin towards God, or to return to God and this call is our challenge, especially as we approach Easter.

Are there things in our life which make us ashamed, or guilty? Do we do or say things we know are not right? Are we living as Jesus wants us to? Most of us will be able to think of things that need improving, or damaged relationships with other people that need to be mended. What better time is there than Lent for putting things right, so that, by Easter, we can feel really close to God and to everybody around us? Amen.

*Our closing hymn was written by Canon Edward Burns in response to a diocesan challenge in Blackburn during 1961 and it is a challenge to all Christians. Let us raise our voices as we sing hymn number 728, '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 story, 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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***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.