

A Service for 21st January, 2024 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 62 verses 5 to 8

Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I shall not be shaken. My salvation and my honour depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. Amen.

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.

© John L. Bell (b. 1949) & Graham Maule (B. 1958)

Let us pray.

Eternal Word who created the universe and gave life to everything that lives on this world, you revealed yourself to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amazing God, it was your intention that Jesus should experience our lives and know us intimately, for 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 save us from the powers of sin and death. Almighty God, accept our praise and adoration for all that you have been, are and shall be and for your boundless, everlasting love. Free us from anxiety and distractions, so are free to sing your praise joyfully, pray to you trustingly and listen to your holy word attentively. 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.**

In your constant love have mercy on us, O God; 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 of the world. 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 next hymn is by the prolific hymn-writer Revd. Fred Pratt Green, who lived from 1903 to 2000 and who wrote most of his hymns after he sat down as a Methodist minister. We shall sing hymn number 345, 'Christ is the world's light, Christ and none other;'

**1. Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other;
Born in our darkness, he became our Brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:
Glory to God on high.**

**2. Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;
No one can serve him and despise another.
Who else unites us, one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high.**

**3. Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none other;
Sold once for silver, murdered here, our Brother –
He, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:
Glory to God on high.**

**4. Give God the glory, God and none other;
Give God the glory, Spirit, Son and Father;
Give God the glory, God in us, my Brother:
Glory to God on high.**

In our prayers of intercession when I say, 'Your kingdom come', please respond with 'Your will be done'. Let us pray.

Merciful and Loving God, 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 failure 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.

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

Loving God, 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.

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.

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

Lord of all, hear our cry of grief for the many lives lost in Gaza, as a result of the heinous attack by Hamas in southern Israel and in subsequent fighting. Remember in your mercy those taken as hostages and also ordinary civilians trapped in Gaza with nowhere to flee, who face constant danger and deprivation as the war rages on. May Israel agree to show restraint, despite its outrage, so that peace may be established. Lord, we continue to pray for an end to the war in Ukraine and ask that Ukraine may remain an independent democracy. May leaders of the world's nations learn to seek the ways of peace and to negotiate and compromise instead of using force against opponents. We pray that the leaders of countries where people are persecuted for their beliefs, race or gender, will turn and seek mercy and justice in their dealings. Remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism, prejudice and oppression and grant them healing in body, mind and spirit, so they can face the future with hope and confidence.

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

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 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 homes and the community, that they, too, can fulfil their duties and find satisfaction as they do 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 living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers. We pray, too, for everyone 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
Loving Lord, enfold them in the warmth of your love, so they may experience your healing, comfort, hope and an 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 all-comers and bring glory to your holy name. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community and, like many of their hymns, it is set to an old Scots ballad, 'Let us haste to Kelvin Grove, bonnie lassie, O', which is why the tune is called 'Kelvingrove'. I gather that the ballad was a bowdlerised version of the original one which was most unlikely to have been sung in a Victorian parlour on a Sunday afternoon – or any other time! 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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The Old Testament reading is Jonah chapter 3 verses 1 to 10

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

“Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed:

“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 1 verses 14 to 20

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!”

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”

At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. Amen.

Cecil Frances Alexander, the author of our penultimate hymn, was a strikingly beautiful bishop's wife, saddled with a man's Christian name as a result of a quaint Irish custom, so it is not surprising that her family and friends usually called her “Fanny”! Hymn number 250, ‘Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult’.

1. Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult

**Of our life's wild restless sea,
Day by day his clear voice soundeth,
Saying, “Christian, follow me.”**

2. As of old apostles heard it

By the Galilean lake

**Turned from home and toil and kindred,
Leaving all for his dear sake.**

**3. Jesus calls us from the worship
Of the vain world's golden store:
From each idol that would keep us,
Saying, "Christian, love me more."**

**4. In our joys and in our sorrows,
Days of toil, and hours of ease,
Still he calls, in cares and pleasures,
"Christian, love me more than these."**

**5. Jesus calls us! By thy mercies,
Saviour, may we hear thy call,
Give our hearts to thine obedience,
Serve and love thee best of all.**

© Cecil Frances Alexander (1818 – 1895)

Sermon: "Come with me and I will teach you to catch people." Mark 1:17

Mark's gospel is full of urgency: when you read it next, see how many times 'at once' or 'immediately' occur, encouraging those who listened to commit themselves to Jesus while they had time. The calling of Andrew, Simon, James and John suggests poetic licence in the men's response, for we know that Simon was married – later in Mark chapter 1, Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law – so I doubt if he abandoned his wife, any more than James and John would have left Zebedee in the lurch. Otherwise, what kind of men would Jesus have chosen? I am confident that Simon and Andrew made sure that their family was provided for, while James and John almost certainly hired local fishermen to help their father to keep the family business going. What Mark advocated was to commit one's heart NOW, to prepare to follow before enthusiasm waned, or friends and family undermined the impulse to follow. There is a danger that, if we put off doing something for the time being, we may never actually do it.

Sometimes, of course, people may know that God is calling them to serve, but choose to try to run from the call. The Book of Jonah deals with such a character, but while there was a prophet, Jonah, in about 700 BC, the book was written two hundred years later. It is most likely to have been a rabbinic tale of how, if we are called by God, we should answer that call, whatever our doubts or fears – not run in the opposite direction! Here's a brief background to the setting of our reading.

In 721BC, Jews' northern kingdom, Israel / Samaria, fell to the Assyrians. Some Israelites were exiled as slaves, while their conquerors brought Gentile settlers to Israel as a result of which many Israelites intermarried and practised a mixture of Jewish and heathen faiths, which was the source of the Jews' and Samaritans' intense hatred. It was also partly why Galileans were looked down upon by Judeans. The Book of Jonah was written before the Babylonian exile in 597BC, so Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, was viewed with abhorrence by Judeans, until Babylon became the focal point of their hatred.

Jonah was called by God to proclaim the Lord's judgement upon Nineveh, a city so huge it took him three days to go around its walls with his message of imminent destruction. Before this happened, Jonah realised that his visit would be like entering a lions' den, so he tried to flee to Spain, which is where the big fish or whale entered the narrative! After his deliverance, Jonah realised he'd better do as God directed, so he travelled to Nineveh to declare the city would be destroyed in 40 days. He probably expected to be seized and killed by the godless Ninevites, so imagine his feelings when

the unpalatable message was taken to heart by the people! Even the king made a public show of repentance and issued this proclamation: **‘Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.’**

Although the image of animals wearing sackcloth seems absurd, such a practice actually existed five or six centuries before Christ was born. The significant thing is the people repented, which means far more than saying sorry. Prophets used the word SHUB for repent, but shub means to turn around 180 degrees, from evil towards God, to return to the Lord. Notice how the Ninevite king was calling for more than a token show of contrition: he called for a real change of heart. The total repentance of the Ninevites prompted God to change his mind and he spared the city, much to Jonah’s disgust! Nevertheless, because he answered God’s call, Jonah changed the hearts of a pagan people who Jews believed were irredeemably condemned.

We may not be called to do anything as dramatic as saving an apostate city, but we are challenged to take Good News to an increasingly secular society. You may ask how we can possibly do such a thing. This is one of the worries that made me hesitate to answer my call to preach until Deaconess Jane Day challenged me to trust Jesus to empower me. After all, in our gospel reading Jesus said, **“Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people.”** When we answer Christ’s call, the Holy Spirit will guide us in what we do as well as what we say, for it is no use speaking about God’s love, if others can’t see it in our lives, in the way we treat one another. Equally, there is no point talking about God’s salvation if we consider non-Christians irredeemably lost and despise them, in the way that Jonah (as a Jew) felt about the Ninevites.

Jesus taught his disciples by example that repentance – turning back to God – often follows acts of generosity or kindness to the sinful, unclean and marginalised in his society. He offered them dignity and self-esteem by the way he treated them. More than that, he offered them hope of a better life, if they followed him. Jesus taught his followers that nobody lies beyond God’s grace: neither Gentiles, nor occupying Romans, nor even Samaritans. He didn’t harangue them, but opened the way for them to follow, if they chose. The hymns of the Wesleys proclaim that salvation is offered to all people, not a select few. When Jesus died on the cross at Calvary, he died for everybody, not just for us.

Christ calls us to follow him now, to commit ourselves to his service wholeheartedly, to live in such a way that, if he returns in glory today or tomorrow – and we do not know when he will come again – we will not be unprepared. He calls us to live in the world, without being judgmental, but upholding kingdom values; to enjoy life fully, whilst keeping our virtue. May our lives be a conduit through which God’s love flows freely, so people may see something different in us that they’d like to share, which is the point when we can guide them to our Lord. 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, more recently from New Zealand, who was based in the UK for 5 years. She now lives in Christchurch, NZ and is enjoying the role of 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.