

A service for 25th February, 2024 Lent 2

Call to Worship: Psalm 22 verses 25 to 28

In the full assembly I will praise you for what you have done; in the presence of those who worship you I will offer the sacrifices I promised.

The poor will eat as much as they want; those who come to the LORD will praise him.

May they prosper forever! All nations will remember the LORD.

From every part of the world they will turn to him; all races will worship him.

The LORD is king, and he rules the nations. Amen.

The Twenty-Second Psalm moves from the despairing cry of abandonment to praising God for his grace. We shall sing of the Lord's grace revealed in our Saviour, Jesus. The writer of our opening hymn, Revd Tim Hughes was born in 1978 the son of an Anglican vicar. He grew up in High Wycombe, before moving to Birmingham as a teenager when his father was appointed vicar of St John's Church, Harborne. Formerly the Director of Worship at Holy Trinity, Brompton, he has since been appointed Vicar of St Luke's, Gas Street, Birmingham. We shall sing Tim Hughes' Advent hymn, 'Light of the world, / You stepped down into darkness,' number 175.

1. Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,

Opened my eyes, let me see

Beauty that made this heart adore you,

Hope of a life spent with you. Chorus:

So here I am to worship,

Here I am to bow down,

Here I am to say that you're my God,

And you're altogether lovely, altogether worthy,

Altogether wonderful to me.

2. King of all days, oh so highly exalted,

Glorious in heaven above.

Humbly you came to the earth you created,

All for love's sake became poor. Chorus:

3. And I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross.

And I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross..... Chorus:

© Tim Hughes

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.

Our next hymn was written by Graham Kendrick for the 25th anniversary of the charity Tearfund in 1993 and followed Kendrick's visit to India the previous year.

Hymn number 693, 'Beauty for brokenness,'

**1. Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,
Lord, in your suffering world this is our prayer.
Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace,
Sunrise to sunset, your kingdom increase!**

**2. Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,
Work for all people, trade for their skills;
Land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,
Voices to plead the cause of those who can't speak. *Chorus:***

God of the poor, friend of the weak,

Give us compassion we pray:

***Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain;
Come, change our love from a spark to a flame.***

3. Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,

Cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share.

**Peace to the killing-fields, scorched earth to green,
Christ for the bitterness, his cross for the pain.**

**4. Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams
Plundered and poisoned – our future, our dreams.**

Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed;

Make us content with the things that we need. *Chorus:*

5. Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame

Until your justice burns brightly again;

Until the nations learn of your ways,

Seek your salvation and bring you their praise. *Chorus: © Graham Kendrick (born 1950)*

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 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.

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, fill the heart of everybody who is worshiping here with the love of our Saviour Jesus, so we find challenge, pleasure and fulfilment in our discipleship. Protect us, our families and friends against harm, help us to resist the temptation to sin and grant that our lives reflect the love Jesus shares with us, so we live out the Gospel message and bring you glory in his holy name. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 8 verses 31 to 38

Then Jesus began to teach his disciples:

“The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law. He will be put to death, but three days later he will rise to life.” He made this very clear to them. So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But Jesus turned round, looked at his disciples, and rebuked Peter. “Get away from me, Satan,” he said. “Your thoughts don’t come from God but from human nature!”

Then Jesus called the crowd and his disciples to him.

“If anyone wants to come with me,” he told them, “he must forget self, carry his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. Do people gain anything if they win the whole world but lose their life? Of course not! There is nothing they can give to regain their life. If a person is ashamed of me and of my teaching in this godless and wicked day, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” 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)

Sermon – *“If anyone wants to come with me, they must forget self, carry their cross, and follow me.”* Mark 8:34

I admire and like Simon Peter, for although he was the rock on which Jesus founded his Church, Peter insisted that his flaws and failures should be recorded in the gospels. I can't see many political leaders today, least of all Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, allowing – even encouraging – that their weaknesses should be broadcast. (**Fake news, folks!**) By letting people know he was flawed, that he had had more than his share of personal disasters – especially his three denials of Christ – Peter gives us all hope: he was not a superman, a perfect follower, yet Jesus raised, restored and reinstated him. Will he not also raise, restore and be gracious to us if we don't succeed at first?

Peter's discipleship was rather like fishing on the Sea of Galilee. One minute everything was calm, the next you would be caught in a terrifying squall. One moment, you were on the crest of a wave; the next you were in the trough, about to be overwhelmed. Our reading followed Peter's declaration that Jesus is God's Anointed, the Messiah, earning the Lord's praise. In the first eight chapters of Mark's gospel, we had journeyed with Peter and his fellow disciples, witnessing Jesus' teaching, his grasp of the Scriptures and his miracles – he had to be the One! Peter's problem lay in what Jesus said after that declaration of faith.

Soon afterwards, Jesus told his followers that he would go to Jerusalem only for the Sanhedrin, the religious Establishment, to reject him. Worse still, he declared that he would be killed and be raised on the third day. Such talk must have seemed ridiculous! After all, at that time, they expected Jesus to lead an uprising to expel the Roman occupiers from the land, restore the Jews to the political and economic power enjoyed in King David's reign, before he compelled the people to observe a new covenant with the Almighty. It made no sense to them that God's Son could be killed by mortal men – surely, neither God nor his angels would allow such a thing to happen. I am sure that Peter was not the only disciple who was outraged at Jesus' words: I can almost visualize James and John, the Sons of Thunder, about to explode, but as usual it was Peter who voiced their objections. **“Never Lord! This shall never happen to you!”**

Jesus turned and rebuked Peter firmly: **“Get behind me, Satan!”** he said. **“You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”** ‘Sawtawn’ is a Hebrew word, meaning an **opponent, adversary or tempter**. He didn't mean that Peter was or is the devil, but that his objections contradicted God's plan for the salvation of all people. It took until the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit for Peter to fully understand God's plan for our salvation and why it was necessary for Jesus to die – as the one perfect sacrifice whose blood washes away all sins in God's eyes. Certainly, at this point Peter could not comprehend, because he still believed in strength of arms rather than the all-conquering power of **racham** or **agape** as Jews and Greeks call **boundless love**.

When Jesus continued, saying that anyone who wished to follow him must also take up their cross, the disciples must have been shaken, for that meant dying under a **Deuteronomic curse**, **“Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.”** Moreover, crucifixion is a terrible death – hanging for up to seventy-two hours in indescribable agony until you died from suffocation or exhaustion. For some of them, the cost of discipleship was indeed death, but what Jesus asked of them and asks of us is

wholehearted commitment, whatever the cost – putting ourselves in God’s hands and trusting his redeeming love –as in the Covenant Prayer used by Methodists:

‘I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.’ It is a big commitment!

Christ calls us to follow him, setting aside things the world holds dear, trusting in God the Father as Jesus himself did when he let sinners like us crucify him, even though he had agonised over his fate in the Garden of Gethsemane only hours before. If you sometimes think the Church’s problems are too big for us to handle, let alone the world’s problems, remember that there is nothing impossible for God, who walks by our side in our discipleship.

Covenant has roots not just in agreement or contract but in shackles – not the shackles of prisoners or slaves but unbreakable chains that won’t allow us to be torn from God. Paul, described these bonds when he wrote, **‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’** When Jesus calls us to proclaim good news and baptize followers in his name, he promises that he will be with us to the very end of the age. The chains of Christ’s covenant hold us fast today, but we are free to choose whether or not to answer his invitation to follow, for we are his friends, not slaves and any service we give is our response to his love for us, rather than a necessary duty to try to earn that love.

Therefore, let us brave the spite and hostility of our increasingly secular, materialistic and selfish society which frequently rejects kingdom values for quick fixes or financial gain. Let us speak up for justice for the poor and oppressed of the Developing World as well as people burdened by debt, or victims of prejudice in its many hateful forms. Let’s accept personal accountability for our actions as well as demanding it of leading political and business leaders, thinking particularly today about executives at the Post Office and Fujitsu, who received huge financial rewards, despite the appalling mistreatment of many postmasters and postmistresses. Their sins may be scarlet, but we must make sure that we live with integrity and loving-kindness. Let’s not only proclaim Good News, but live it, too. Let’s be brave enough to accept that might is not always right. Remember, even our Lord’s helplessness at Calvary was strong enough to destroy the shackles of sin that Satan used to enslave us. Through Christ Jesus, love will overcome hatred and righteousness will conquer sin! Let each of us take up our cross and play our part in God’s mission of love to our world. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Canon Edward Burns in 1968, as his response to the diocese of Blackburn’s ‘Call to Mission’ challenge to write a suitable hymn for its call – and what a response it is! It is a call to share the Good News – a battle cry in an increasingly secular society! Remember, we certainly do have a gospel to proclaim. Hymn number 418, ‘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.