

A service for 3rd March, 2024 Lent 3 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 19 verses 7 to 11

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by John Bell and the late Graham Maule of the Iona Community. Like many of their hymns, it is set to a Scots melody, in this case from the Isle of Lewis. We shall sing the first three verses of 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 (1958 - 2019)

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.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your Name; your kingdom come; your will be done; on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.

Graham Kendrick is amongst the most published hymn-writers today. Born in 1950, a son of a Baptist pastor, Graham has spent more or less all of his adult life working to promote the Christian faith, first as Musical Director of British Youth for Christ between 1976 and 1980, then in 1984 with the Ichthus Christian Fellowship. He was one of the prime movers in the 'March For Jesus' campaign which ran between the late 1980s and the mid 1990s and on 25th June 1994 involved twelve million people from one hundred and seventy countries.

This hymn was written for the Spring Harvest of 1984 after much research into the concept of the God, who created and loves everything, taking human form, becoming the Suffering Servant. We 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)

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 by warming the hearts of people who possess power and influence to act for the wellbeing of all people.

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. Moreover, grant us the faith and courage to make difficult, possibly painful decisions to help us move forwards as the body of Christ.

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 and for peaceful resolutions to disputes between other countries before they escalate into warfare. Teach national leaders to seek the ways of mercy and justice through which lasting peace may be established, to negotiate and compromise instead of using force against opponents. Lord, remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression. Grant them all the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives, as well as healing them 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 while 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, debt, addictions, broken relationships, loneliness and especially bereavement. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we 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, courage 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 John chapter 2 verses 13 to 22

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said,

“Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!” His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

Then the Jews demanded of him,

“What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

Jesus answered them,

“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

The Jews replied,

“It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Revd. Dr. Andrew Pratt, a Devonian with a Master’s Degree in marine biology. After teaching for a seven years, he trained for the Methodist ministry at Queens College in Birmingham and gained his PhD with a thesis on the 1933 “Methodist Hymn Book”. He sounds quite a man! Hymn number 253, ‘Love inspired the anger’.

**1. Love inspired the anger
That cleared a temple court,
Overturned the wisdom
Which their greed had wrought.**

**2. Love inspired the anger
That set the leper free
From the legal structures
That brought misery.**

**3. Love inspired the anger
That cursed a viper's brood:
Set on domination,
Self with God confused.**

**4. Love inspires the anger
That curses poverty,
Preaches life's enrichment,
Seeks equality.**

**5. Love inspires the anger –
That still can set us free
From the world's conventions –
Bringing liberty.**

© Andrew Pratt (born 1948)

Sermon: “How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!” John 2:16

Imagine how you would react if you had authorised a Fairtrade Market in this church, but on the appointed day you discovered a Car Boot Sale being held in the body of the church. Would you ignore what was going on, or try to eject the traders, or call the police, or demand to know who'd authorised the Car Boot? Our reading from John depicted Jesus' anger at how tradition had usurped the purpose of worship at the temple and how he overturned tables and drove both traders and beasts from the courtyard in righteous anger.

The other three gospels record how Jesus cleared the temple of its merchants only a short time before he was crucified, but John set the event at the beginning of his ministry, nearly three years earlier. The synoptic gospels use the clearing of the temple as the incident that led to the Sanhedrin's determination that he must die, but in John's gospel it was the raising of Lazarus that clearly demonstrated Jesus' divine power, for only God has dominion over death. Yet, despite their detailed study of the Scriptures, the Jewish religious establishment not only failed to recognize Jesus for who he is, but held onto the idea that the Messiah would lead a revolt against the occupying Romans and feared the consequences of such an act if huge numbers of Jews followed Jesus. Therefore, he had to die!

Why then did John write about the clearing of the temple so early in his gospel? What can we learn from it and how does it challenge us nearly two thousand years later? One of the features of John's gospel is its mission to liberate people from various forms of oppression to new life in Christ Jesus. John almost certainly preached to a small, mixed Christian community of Jews, Gentiles and possibly Samaritans in either Ephesus, or Alexandria, a church that was under pressure from rival theologies. John taught that Jesus' death on the cross was his moment of greatest triumph and judgement happens the moment we encounter Christ, so eternal life is here and now, not some distant point in the future.

When God handed Moses tablets bearing his Commandments for the Israelites, there were ten requirements for righteous living, but by the time of Jesus these Commandments had been expanded into Jewish traditions, resulting in 613 rules, all of which had to be observed in minute detail for anybody to consider himself, or herself righteous in God's sight. Ordinary people found it almost impossible to fulfil the law's

demands, for its sheer weight was a burden. Not only did you have to wash and cook food in an intricate way, but you could become ceremonially unclean in the most mundane circumstances. Jesus saw how these Torah-based traditions shackled the people, making them slaves of God's covenant, burdening them in such a way that they could not live life fully; worse still, ensuring that most would fail to meet the standards demanded of them.

Jesus had gone to the temple at the beginning of the Passover Festival, a time of pilgrimage for many Jews from the outer reaches of the known world where they had been scattered as a result of conquest by Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans. Jews were expected to travel to Jerusalem for major festivals, in many ways like devout Moslems are expected to perform the Hajj, or trip to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Naturally, if you are travelling hundreds of miles over rough terrain, it is inconvenient to bring a lamb, ox or dove with you, so you would need to purchase one as a sacrificial offering once you arrived in Jerusalem. Moreover, Roman currency could not be used in the temple, for Roman coins had the emperor's picture on it and, as the emperor claimed to be a god, such coins were deemed graven images by Jews, so Rome allowed them to use their own coins for temple offerings. Needless to say, visitors needed a bureau de change in order to worship at the temple.

At first, merchants sold animals for sacrifice, or exchanged temple coins for other denominations as a service to visitors, but later, people were exploited in the name of faith. It was not just exploitation to which Jesus objected. He was objecting to the whole tradition of animal sacrifice, for as Amos had written, **“Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”** Sacrifices alone could not satisfy God; what he requires is changed hearts and changed lives.

When Jesus cleared the temple, he was not only issuing a challenge to the Jewish religious establishment; he was liberating people from tradition which had taken the place of faith, from practices that did not offer hope of becoming righteous to ordinary Jews – to a new way of life in which we are drawn close to God through grace – unmerited, freely-given love – simply by faith in Jesus and the gospel message. We don't have to try to earn God's favour by works, or careful observance of rules: God loves us to the uttermost as we are. Our service should be our free response to the boundless love that both took Jesus to his cross at Calvary – the One Perfect sacrifice for all sins - and the love that raised him three days later to offer us life beyond our earthly span.

This certainly does not invalidate the Commandments, but as Paul wrote to the Romans, **‘The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law.’** Don't confuse love with liking: the Good Samaritan would not have liked the injured Jew on the road to Jericho – Jews and Samaritans hated one another passionately – but he was moved by loving-kindness – **chesed** in Hebrew, so he went to his aid.

We are challenged to consider our discipleship at Lent. Do we have practices or traditions that exclude, or discourage other people? If strangers, especially non-Christians, were to join us today, would they find us welcoming? Would they be encouraged to understand what we are doing in our worship, to take part as fully as possible? Are we building ecumenical bridges, or are we put off by others' traditions?

For the sake of Jesus, let us resolve to draw in both friends and strangers, making them welcome by letting the love of Christ shine through our words and deeds, guiding them to the Good News we are commissioned to take to the world. Amen.

We shall close our worship with one of the greatest of Charles Wesley's hymns which, in the third verse gives a marvellous paraphrase of Paul's description of Christ in Philippians 2: 5 – 11. Over my years as a local preacher, I have learned to use it, whenever possible, after the sermon – for good reasons. Hymn number 345, 'And can it be'.

**1. And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?**

**2. 'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!
Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
Let angel minds enquire no more.**

**3. He left his Father's throne above –
So free, so infinite his grace –
Emptied himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me!**

**4. Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray –
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.**

**5. No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own!**

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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.