

A Service for 4th February, 2024 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 147 verses 1 and 7 to 11

Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him! Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; make music to our God on the harp. He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills. He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call. His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of a man; the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love. Amen.

Our opening hymn reminds us of our need for the light and truth of Christ to guide us. It was written in 1993 by Bernadette Farrell, a gifted Roman Catholic hymn-writer, a social activist from West Yorkshire, who was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK and whose hymns span all denominations. We shall sing hymn number 706, 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness,'

1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness,

Longing for truth, we turn to you.

Make us your own, your holy people,

Light for the world to see. *Chorus:*

Christ, be our Light!

Shine in our hearts,

Shine through the darkness.

Christ be our Light!

Shine in your Church gathered today.

2. Longing for peace, our world is troubled.

Longing for hope, many

despair.

Your word alone has power to save us.

Make us your living voice. *Chorus:*

3. Longing for food, many are hungry.

Longing for water, many still thirst.

Make us your bread, broken for others,

Shared until all are fed. *Chorus:*

4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.

Longing for warmth, many are cold.

Make us your building, sheltering others,

Walls made of living stone. *Chorus:*

5. Many the gifts, many the people,

Many the hearts that yearn to belong.

Let us be servants to one another,

Making your kingdom come. *Chorus:*

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

Let us pray.

Almighty God, we come to you in awe and wonder, for you are the Creator of life throughout the universe, the Source of wisdom and Fountain of grace. We offer our praise and thanksgiving to you, our heavenly Father.

Christ Jesus, our Saviour and friend, we come to you with joyful, thankful hearts, for you shared our mortal form and lived among us to show us in words and deeds of

love how we should live. Your life, death and resurrection save us from the power of sin and death. Son of God, we offer you our worship and adoration.

Spirit of the living God, our comforter, guide and source of righteousness, lead us in our discipleship so we may fulfil our calling. Fill us with love to serve our neighbours as you call us to. Holy Spirit, set our hearts ablaze.

Lord of all, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may all honour, glory, power and praise be yours, now and forevermore. 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 answering Christ's call to serve him, faithfully and joyfully, so we may glorify 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 hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. Their hymns are usually set to old Scots ballads, but this is sung to a French carol melody, 'Noel Nouvelet'. Hymn number 251, 'Jesus, Christ is waiting,'

1. Jesus Christ is waiting,

Waiting in the streets;

No one is his neighbour,

All alone he eats.

Listen, Lord Jesus,

I am lonely, too:

Make me, friend or stranger,

Fit to wait on you.

2. Jesus Christ is raging,

Raging in the streets,

Where injustice spirals

And real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am angry, too:
In the kingdom's causes,
Let me rage with you.

3. Jesus Christ is healing,
Healing in the streets,
Curing those who suffer,
Touching those he greets.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I have pity, too:
Let my care be active,
Healing, just like you.

4. Jesus Christ is dancing,
Dancing in the streets,
Where each sign of hatred
He, with love, defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I should triumph, too:
Where good conquers evil,
Let me dance with you.

5. Jesus Christ is calling,
Calling in the streets,
'Who will join my journey?
I will guide their feet.'
Listen, Lord Jesus,
Let my fears be few:
Walk one step before me;
I will follow you.

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

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 and in your sustaining grace. However, we are aware of the suffering of neighbours both nearby and further afield, 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 to heal some of the world's brokenness, however small our role may be. We know, too, that our powers are limited, so many situations are far beyond our powers to remedy, but they are not beyond yours.

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

Loving God, 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 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.

We pray for our church, the churches in our Circuit and 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 into wars. 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 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 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 both homes and the community, that they, too, can fulfil their duties and find satisfaction in doing 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 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 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 experience your healing, hope and lasting 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 Gospel reading is Mark chapter 1 verses 29 to 39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed:
"Everyone is looking for you!"

Jesus replied,
“Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. Amen.

Although the limitations of “Singing the Faith” frequently irritate me, I have to acknowledge there are some superb new hymns, one of which is Jean Holloway’s, ‘Lord, we come to ask your healing,’ sung to the lovely Welsh melody “All through the night”, or “Ar hyd y nos”. Number 652, ‘Lord, we come to ask your healing’.

1. Lord, we come to ask your healing,

Teach us of love;

All unspoken shame revealing,

Teach us of love.

Take our selfish thoughts and actions,

Petty feuds, divisive factions,

Hear us now to you appealing,

Teach us of love.

2. Soothe away our pain and sorrow,

Hold us in love;

Grace we cannot buy or borrow,

Hold us in love.

Though we see but dark and danger,

Though we spurn both friend and stranger,

Though we often dread tomorrow,

Hold us in love.

3. When the bread is raised and broken,

Fill us with love;

Words of consecration spoken,

Fill us with love.

As our grateful prayers continue,

Make the faith that we have in you

More than just an empty token,

Fill us with love.

4. Help us live for one another,

Bind us in love;

Stranger, neighbour, father, mother –

Bind us in love.

All are equal at your table,

Through your Spirit make us able

To embrace as sister, brother,

Bind us in love.

© Jean Holloway (born 1939)

Sermon: “Let us go somewhere else, so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” Mark 1: 38

The crucial task for early evangelists was to convince listeners that Jesus was more than exceptional rabbi, or gifted healer: that he is God’s Son, both fully human and divine.

Mark wrote the first half of his gospel as the “Messianic Secret” to give readers an opportunity to discover Jesus’ true nature in the way his disciples’ eyes were opened, for until the eighth chapter, Jesus neither called himself ‘Messiah’, nor acknowledged that title. This allows us to share the disciples’ wonder and confusion as they walked with the

Lord, heard his teaching, saw his healings and miracles and marvelled at his love for the poor, sick, outcast and marginalised in society. Only after this did Peter act as their spokesman by declaring, “You are the Christ.”

In our gospel reading, Jesus, James and John went to the home of Simon Peter and Andrew at a time of crisis, for Peter’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever which Luke recorded as a ‘high fever’, possibly more life-threatening than uncomfortable. As soon as Jesus took her by her hand and helped her up, Peter’s mother-in-law was healed, so completely she was able to serve them at their meal, which I presume had been prepared by Peter’s wife. It is easy to overlook that Jesus hadn’t only healed by the warmth of personal touch, but had made himself ritually unclean, according to Torah, by physical contact with the sick. This was his second healing on the Sabbath which shows that chesed or loving-kindness took priority over rules and customs in Christ’s opinion.

It is worth noting that other Jews in Capernaum observed the Sabbath rules, for Mark wrote that they came in droves with people who were physically, spiritually and mentally ill after sunset, for the Sabbath ends when the first three stars can be seen at dusk. Three kinds of people came to Peter’s house that evening: the sick; those who brought them and the curious, who came to see what Jesus would do. As with the man possessed by an evil spirit at the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus forbade the evil spirits of those he healed to name him the ‘Holy One of God’, leaving his disciples, other witnesses and us to make that judgement.

Whereas in Isaiah chapter 40, the prophet describes God as untiring, Mark showed that, although Jesus is divine, he is also human, for there are several instances of Christ becoming physically exhausted, including sleeping through a storm on the Sea of Galilee, yet after the many healings at Peter’s house, he rose very early next morning, the first day of the week, in order to find quiet place to pray. This illustrates that prayer was a most important part of his ministry, because it provided spiritual food for his work. Inevitably, Peter and the other disciples sought him out and when Peter found him he said, “Everyone is looking for you!”

What was their purpose for seeking him: for healing, or to see Jesus perform more ‘signs of kingdom’? Whatever their motivation, Jesus was clearly not seeking self-aggrandisement, for he retorted, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” His mission was to take Good News to the world, not to build a power-base in a supportive town. Jesus wasn’t content to bask in local fame as a miracle worker and healer: his task was to take on evil wherever possible and to offer healing for brokenness. Nevertheless, he took care of himself in body and spirit, by making time and space for rest and prayer.

This ought to be our model, too, for it is too easy to work ourselves to a state of ill-being or worse. The Calvinist work ethic, though laudable, is often taken to extremes, resulting in burn-out, ill-health, depression and broken relationships. You may have seen colleagues at work striving so hard that, although they have prospered in status and wealth, their efforts have brought them neither joy nor peace of mind: often the opposite is true. A Georgian poet, Welshman W.H. Davies penned these lines:

**What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?—
No time to stand beneath the boughs,
And stare as long as sheep and cows:
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass:**

**No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night:
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance:
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began?
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.**

It is not just in our working lives that we can be too busy for our own wellbeing. As a teacher, I knew parents who spent their days working to provide their children with every material thing they wanted, yet failed to give them the time and companionship needed for healthy family lives. I've seen friends' marriages break down because the desire to get on in life led them to neglect one another. We must take care to find a healthy balance between work and re-creation.

Bishop Reginald Heber, author of 'Holy, holy, holy! Lord God almighty' and 'Brightest and best of the suns of the morning', was appointed Bishop of Calcutta in 1823. However, his duties were not confined to that one city, as his title implies, but instead to much of the South Pacific, including Ceylon and Australia, for he was the only Anglican Bishop in that hemisphere. Bishop Heber was conscientious and his sense of duty drove him to travel tirelessly during his three years as Bishop. Heat and hard work broke his health and he died aged only forty-two, in tragic circumstances: he had just preached a sermon at Trichinopoly, denouncing the caste system before a large congregation; he decided to cool off in the swimming pool of the house where he was a guest; shortly afterwards he suffered a stroke whilst swimming there and he drowned before anyone realised what had happened. Don't be misled into thinking that was a Nineteenth Century phenomenon. Many presbyters are working themselves into states of ill-being because of their workload and although they won't complain, they need our support and prayers. If we take them for granted, there will be consequences.

As Twenty-first Century disciples, we're challenged to take Good News to the world, wherever Christ calls us to serve, but it is easy to feel beaten down by our increasingly secular society as well as trying to meet the needs of our communities. Most churches are blessed with members who support the church's mission, but sometimes it can seem like a losing battle. They should neither despair nor work themselves to a standstill, for as Paul wrote in Romans chapter eight, **'We know that in everything God works all things together for good to those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.'** Let us rekindle the flame of Methodism by making time to reflect prayerfully upon which parts of our ministry is bearing fruit and which needs pruning –before encouraging others to support the work.

The best, most eloquent preaching won't bring people back to the church; nor provocative advertisements or slogans. We are the best – or worst - advertisements for our faith, for what really matters is how we act towards and care for others – seeking their wellbeing, as Jesus did in his ministry. We must let Christ's love shine through our lives, for if we show we're different, others may want to know what makes us special and that will provide opportunities to spread the gospel message. However, we won't do that unless we give ourselves opportunities to rest and pray. Amen.

***“We have no mission but to serve / In full obedience to our Lord: / To care for all,
without reserve, / And spread his liberating Word.” We close our worship with a***

hymn written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green in 1969, headed 'The Caring Church'. We shall sing hymn number 415, 'The Church of Christ, in every age'.

**1. The Church of Christ, in every age,
Beset by change, but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.**

**2. Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat,
And never live until they die.**

**3. Then let the servant Church arise,
A caring Church that longs to be
A partner in Christ's sacrifice,
And clothed in Christ's humanity.**

**4. For he alone, whose blood was shed,
Can cure the fever in our blood
And teach us how to share our bread
And feed the starving multitude.**

**5. We have no mission but to serve
In full obedience to our Lord:
To care for all, without reserve,
And spread his liberating Word.**

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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.