

A service for 28th April, 2024 (StF) Easter 5

Call to Worship: Psalm 117

Praise the LORD, all nations! Praise him, all peoples! His love for us is strong and his faithfulness is eternal. Praise the LORD! Amen.

Our first hymn was written by Revd. Tim Hughes, who was a former Director of Worship at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton before being appointed vicar of St. Luke's, Gas Street, Birmingham. Although intended as an Advent hymn, 'Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,' is also excellent to open worship at other times in the year. Hymn 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:*

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Let us pray.

Living God our heavenly Father, we come to worship and adore you, for you not only brought the universe to life, but sustain all living beings and raised Jesus from the grave. By doing so, you have reconciled sinners like us to you and you have broken the power of death, offering us eternal life.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Good Shepherd who brought our salvation at Calvary breaking the hold of Satan by atoning for the sins of the world. All honour and glory are yours, faithful Son of the Father.

Sacred Spirit, you are our guide, courage, strength and inspiration in our discipleship. Without you, we are helpless and hopeless. Come to lead us now and breathe new life into us.

Mighty Lord of life and love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all things are made new through the cross and empty tomb and so we come to praise and glorify your holy name.

Almighty God, thank you for the many blessings we receive from you: for all the good things we enjoy; everyone who guides, loves and inspires us; for your undying love, despite our sinfulness. Forgive us when we have

strayed from the path you set before us, when we are selfish and self-righteous, unforgiving and judgmental. Pardon us when our faith is weak and we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

Help us to change our ways as we acknowledge our pride and lovelessness. Breathe new life into us, renew and restore us, so our lives may reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death. Re-ignite the embers of our faith into a mighty flame, so we may build your kingdom here.

Loving God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only pardoned us, but invite us to walk with you once more. May we serve our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives honour you in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

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 one of my favourite hymns, which was written by a Congregational/ URC minister, Revd. Bryn Rees in 1974. The main setting, "Tetherdown" was composed by Gerald Barnes, the organist at Tetherdown URC, Muswell Hill, London, where he was organist and Revd. Rees was Minister – so I suppose you'd call it a home-grown hymn. Hymn number 255, 'The kingdom of God is justice and joy'.

1. The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
For Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
And here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

2. The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
The lepers are cleansed, the sinners find place,
The outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
And hope is awakened in place of despair.

3. The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
Believe the Good News, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross,
Our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.

4. The kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
In Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
And all things cry glory to God all in all!

© Bryn Rees {1911 – 1983}

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and its needs.

Loving God, at Eastertide we recall how you sent your Son to heal our broken world and to offer everyone who would follow him sure hope of salvation and wholeness, even amidst the world's suffering. We believe that all things are

possible for you, so whilst we offer ourselves to do what we can to ensure the wellbeing of those around us, we turn to you in situations that are beyond our power, asking that you will reach out in mercy to rectify the results of mankind's cruelty, exploitation, pride and indifference which results in so much suffering around the globe.

We pray for the Church both local and the World Church. Teach us to set aside our divisions and differences, so that we learn to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him in unity of mission. May your Holy Spirit help us use our love, gifts and graces to guide the uncommitted to accept Jesus as the friend, Lord and Saviour of the world. May we act as good shepherds and carry the gospel light to this conflicted and sin-darkened world. Bring us safely through this pandemic and renew our calling.

Lord, as we reflect upon our environment and all the issues it faces, such as pollution and diminishing resources, we ask you to inspire and guide those who are striving to keeping earth habitable for future generations; we pray for people who campaign for a fair and proper use of the world's resources, including the distribution of coronavirus vaccines to impoverished countries; We bring our concerns for those who strive for our wellbeing, thinking especially of members of the NHS, scientists, carers and key-workers at present, as they try to bring us through this time of trial and anguish. Keep them safe and grant them success in their endeavours.

Heavenly Father, reach out to those of us whose hearts are broken because of the COVID19 pandemic, those who have endured loneliness, all who are suffering from long-COVID and everybody who is afraid and can see no way forward. In the name of the risen Lord Jesus, enfold us with your love, comfort and strengthen us. Renew our flagging spirits and bring us through this time of spiritual darkness into the light of your salvation.

Lord, we remember people whose memories and faculties are diminishing because of a dementia, their families, friends and carers who find this time of pandemic is adding to their distress. Grant them the support and hope they need to keep going. Have compassion on people whom we know who are sick in body, mind or spirit; those who are in need or any kind of trouble; neighbours who live with depression or whose relationships have broken down and everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear. Help us to offer them both practical support and friendship, but enfold them with your love, so they may find comfort, healing, courage and peace.

We offer a prayer for people who suffer: the victims of prejudice, oppression, injustice, terrorism and conflict. As we recall how Jesus Christ suffered persecution, injustice, torture and execution for our sakes, teach us and our leaders to act justly and to care for our neighbours, especially people whom we find it difficult to like. In Jesus' name, may the whole earth be transformed by mercy and rejoice in hope. Gracious Lord, inspire and guide

the leaders of nations and opposition groups in the way of peace. Teach them the futility of using violence to achieve their aims: instead may they seek to follow the way of justice and peace. We pray for the many lands that are blighted by conflict around the world, Bless the work of mediators and peace campaigners with success, so that your love overcomes the world's hatred and grant that we may live in harmony with our neighbours, so we mirror the peace we ask for the world.

Abba, Father God, bless us all, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us to lead good lives. Above all, teach us to share your abundant love with all-comers, so we may act as good shepherds, in the name of our risen Lord, to whom be glory for evermore. Amen.

The Gospel reading is John chapter 15 verses 1 to 8

“I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit. You have been made clean already by the teaching I have given you. Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. Whoever does not remain in me is thrown out like a branch and dries up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burnt. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it. My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples.” Amen.

I have been known to criticize “Singing the Faith” for changing words of familiar hymns without giving prior warning of having done so. Our next hymn is one such case, for I used it when I was preaching on the theme “I am the Good Shepherd”, only to find that the verse about the Good Shepherd has been replaced by the Vine. Fortunately, the new version fits my next reading! Hymn number 252, ‘Jesus the Lord said, “I am the Bread”’.

1. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Bread,
The Bread of Life for the world am I.
The Bread of Life for the world am I,
The Bread of Life for the world am I.’
Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Bread,
The Bread of Life for the world am I’.

2. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Vine –
The true and fruitful Vine am I.’

3. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Way,
The true and living Way am I.’

4. Jesus the Lord said, ‘I am the Light,

The one true Light of the world am I.'

5. Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Life,
The Resurrection and the Life am I.'
The Resurrection and the Life am I,
The Resurrection and the Life am I.'
Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Life,
The Resurrection and the Life am I.'

Anon. © tr. Dermott Monahan (1906 – 57)

Sermon: *"I am the true vine."* John 15:1

One of the advantages of living in Wordsley on the fringe of the Black Country used to be the small deposits of sulphurous soot carried from neighbouring Brierley Hill and Amblecote. These deposits, whilst hardly benefitting human health, reduced the incidence of black spot on roses and, since the decline of heavy industry in the district, this fungal disease has considerably increased. Many years ago, my side garden had about sixty rose bushes, some of which produced unusual-coloured blooms. However, years ago, I neglected my usual Springtime pruning, concentrating instead on my vegetable patch. Thus it was that it was only in June that I noticed many rose bushes had lost many leaves and a large number of leaves that were still attached had tell-tale black spots with yellow fringes. I consulted my rose-growers' manual, hard-pruned infected plants and sprayed every rose in an attempt to save them. Alas, despite my efforts, I lost one third of my bushes to the disease.

The gospel reading reinforced the need to prune plants if we want to get the best from them. However, Christ was making several important points in this teaching. When he described himself as "the true vine", Jesus pointed to himself as the fulfilment of his Father's establishment of a holy priesthood, of people who were to draw close to God and obtain their spiritual sustenance from him. All too often, as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had written, the Israelites had spurned God's providence and care, producing sour fruit of rebelliousness, faithlessness, selfishness and pride. Whereas the Israelites had their origins in the patriarch, Jacob, Jesus was going to be the stem of a people who would be what the Father wanted them to become.

As the plant's stem, Jesus would provide the spiritual nourishment for followers – the branches – to grow strong and produce good fruit, but he added that God would be the vine-dresser, who would remove dead branches and prune others to make them more productive. If you think about a number of plants, including vines, many produce more fruits than are necessary, so a gardener will remove some as soon as they form, in order that those that are left will grow stronger and sweeter. This is what Christ was alluding to by the word **kathairei**: not so much wholesale cutting back as perfecting. Jesus said that if we try to act in our own power, we will fail, just as the disciples failed him before they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

We need to draw on Christ through the Spirit if our discipleship is to be fruitful.

If we are branches of the vine with Christ as the stem, we are part of the whole Vine – part of the world Church – rather than individuals. If the vine is to thrive, the branches must be healthy, so we need to be sustained through fellowship, Bible study and prayer. Just as branches grow and spread, we should be reaching out to the community, rather than looking inward and this ought to include exploring ways of working with other groups to spread the Good News in actions as well as words, perhaps doing something that will improve people's lives.

However, what did Jesus mean by the idea of God pruning us? To begin with, as branches, either as individuals, or as churches, we are called to consider what baggage we carry with us and whether or not some of it ought to be discarded, if it impedes our discipleship. Are some of our activities unproductive in the long term, taking time and effort from more vital tasks? Are we trying to do too much and diluting our effectiveness? Doing too much is as bad as doing too little, because of the attendant lack of focus on what is more important. We need to do some soul-searching on this issue, because I'm sure we all want to do as much as we can for our Saviour. However, I'm sure he wants us to do no more than we are able, but to do it well. If we remove clusters of flowers from a tomato plant, we are not getting rid of rubbish, but are taking away some otherwise fruitful components, so the plant can develop better fruit.

Let us consider our activities as followers of Christ. As individuals are we using our gifts, graces and love as effectively as we might, or are we spreading ourselves too thinly? Are there others in our church who might do some of the things we are doing and ease our load, so we can concentrate on what we are best suited to do? As a church, are we using our resources – human and material – as effectively as we ought? Are any of our church activities or traditions no longer productive, in which case are they taking us away from what we are called to be? Do we have the faith to let go of what is no longer productive in order to grow more strongly in Christ's power and possibly grow in a different direction? This is a special consideration as we move from Lockdown restrictions into a new normality. It's not easy, but it is worth taking a chance if it helps us grow as the Lord wants us to and if we rise to the challenge, we won't be doing so in our own strength, but in the power of the Holy Spirit who connects us to our true Vine. Amen.

'Enlarge, inflame and fill my heart / With boundless charity divine; / So shall I all my strength exert, / And love them with a zeal like thine; We conclude our worship as we sing hymn number 661, written by Charles Wesley in 1749, 'Give me the faith which can remove'

**1. Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;**

Give me the child-like praying love,
Which longs to build thy house again;
Thy love, let it my heart o'erpower,
And all my simple soul devour.

2. I would the precious time redeem,
And longer live for this alone;
To spend, and to be spent, for them
Who have not yet my Saviour known;
Fully on these my mission prove,
And only breathe, to breathe thy love.

3. My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
Into thy blessed hands receive;
And let me live to preach thy word,
And let me to thy glory live;
My every sacred moment spend
In publishing the sinners' friend.

4. Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
With boundless charity divine;
So shall I all my strength exert,
And love them with a zeal like thine;
And lead them to thy open side,
The sheep for whom their Shepherd died.

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forevermore. Amen.