

A service for 5th May, 2024 Easter 6 (StF)

Call to worship: 1 John chapter 4 verses 10 and 11

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Canon Michael Saward in 1966 and was a favourite of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey. Revd. Saward was Canon Treasurer at St, Paul's Cathedral as well as a member of the Jubilate Group of hymn-writers. We shall sing hymn number 319, 'Christ Triumphant, ever reigning,'

**1. Christ triumphant, ever reigning,
Saviour, Master, King,
Lord of heaven, our lives sustaining,
Hear us as we sing: *Chorus*
*Yours the glory and the crown,
The High renown, the eternal name.***

**2. Word incarnate, truth revealing,
Son of Man on earth!
Power and majesty concealing
By your humble birth: *Chorus***

**3. Suffering Servant, scorned, ill-treated,
Victim crucified!
Death is through the cross defeated,
Sinners justified: *Chorus***

**4. Priestly King, enthroned for ever
High in heaven above!
Sin and death and hell shall never
Stifle hymns of love: *Chorus***

**5. So, our hearts and voices raising
Through the ages long,
Ceaselessly upon you gazing,
This shall be our song: *Chorus***

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Let us pray.

Almighty God, we have come to worship and adore you today, for you are the Author of life throughout the universe and took human form as Christ Jesus to reconcile sinners like us to you through his life, death and resurrection. All honour, glory, power and praise are yours by right, our heavenly Father.

Lord Jesus Christ, you brought our salvation on a cross at Calvary breaking, as the One perfect sacrifice who atoned for the sins of the world and broke Satan's power. Your empty tomb overcame death and offers us everlasting life. All honour, glory, power and praise are yours, faithful Son of the Father.

Sacred Spirit, you are the guide, encourager and inspiration in our discipleship. Remove our doubts and fears, for without you, we are helpless and hopeless. Come, lead us now and breathe new life into us.

Mighty Trinity 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. Amen.

In our prayer of confession, when I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with 'Hear our prayer'.

Almighty God, our hearts overflow as we consider how you have blessed us with this beautiful, self-sustaining planet on which we live. Thank you for everything we enjoy, for opportunities to serve you and our neighbours, for people who have guided, loved and inspired us and, most of all for loving us despite our manifold failings.

As we reflect upon your holiness and generous grace, our own sinfulness stands before us. Lord, 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 serve you as you have called us to.

'Lord, in your mercy' 'Hear our prayer'.

Help us to change our ways as we remember words and deeds that have caused hurt and offence to our neighbours, as well as opportunities to help those in need or distress which we have not taken. Let us lead Christ-centred, not self-centred lives and re-ignite the embers of our faith into a mighty flame, so we may help build your kingdom here.

'Lord, in your mercy' 'Hear our prayer'.

Loving God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have pardoned us, so we may walk with you once more without the burden of sin to hold us back. May we serve our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives honour you in the beautiful name of our risen Lord. 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.

Our next hymn was written in 1993 by Australian Darlene Zschech, a well-known as a singer, songwriter, worship leader and speaker. Over many years, she was involved in the worship and music publications of Hillsong Church, Sydney, the largest Pentecostal "mega-church" in Australia, with many branches around the world. Hymn number 363, 'My Jesus, my Saviour'.

**My Jesus, my Saviour,
Lord, there is none like you.
All of my days I want to praise
The wonders of your mighty love.
My comfort, my shelter
Tower of refuge and strength,
Let every breath, all that I am,
Never cease to worship you. *Chorus:*
*Shout to the Lord, all the earth, let us sing,
Power and majesty, praise to the King.
Mountains bow down and the seas will roar
At the sound of your name.
I sing for joy at the work of your hands
Forever I'll love you, forever I'll stand.
Nothing compares to the promise I have in you.***

Darlene Zschech (born 1965)

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of ourselves and others.

Loving God, 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. As his followers, we ask you to help us serve our neighbours, but we know that our powers are limited. However, we believe that all things are possible for you, so we turn to you in situations that are beyond us, 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 our Church, churches in our district and, indeed, the World Church. Teach us to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and to serve him in unity. 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. Help us carry the gospel light to this conflicted and broken world in our words and actions.

Jesus declared, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God', so we ask your blessing on everyone who is working for peace. We pray for aid-workers and medics as well as negotiators that they enjoy success in their work. May fighting in Ukraine, in Gaza / Palestine, Haiti and Somalia come to an end and may the tension between Iran and Israel not escalate into open warfare. Teach national leaders to negotiate and compromise instead of resorting to force. Inspire them to govern with mercy and justice which are the foundations of real peace. Lord, remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression, granting all of them the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives. May find healing in body, mind and spirit.

Lord of creation, we know that our lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of the ecosystem upon which we and all living beings depend. The effects of global warming are evident in the extreme weather that is affecting every continent, with floods and droughts, famines, wildfires, melting ice-caps and increasingly strong storms making life increasingly difficult. For the sake of life on this planet and for future generations, help us to live in a more sustainable way by becoming less wasteful and using only the resources we need.

Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for people who are sick in body, mind or spirit, besides everybody who is in any kind of need, or trouble and those who have been bereaved. May they not only receive the care and support they require, but may they also experience your presence in their time of need.

Lord, in a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help, confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them
Lord, may we be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we may offer them friendship and practical support, but we pray that you will enfold them in the warmth of your love, so they receive healing, hope, courage and transcending peace.

Abba, Father God, bless us all, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm, strengthen our faith and help us share your abundant love with all-comers, in the name of our risen Lord Jesus, to whom be glory and honour for evermore. Amen.

Our first reading is Acts chapter 10 verses 44 to 48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who were listening to his message. The Jewish believers who had come from Joppa with Peter were amazed that God had poured out his gift of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speaking in strange tongues and praising God's greatness. Peter spoke up:

“These people have received the Holy Spirit, just as we also did. Can anyone, then, stop them from being baptized with water?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay with them for a few days. Amen.

The Gospel reading is John chapter 15 verses 9 to 17

“I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you. The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them. And you are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because servants do not know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures. And so the Father will give you whatever you ask of him in my name. This, then, is what I command you: love one another.” Amen.

We continue with hymn number 242, ‘A new commandment I give unto you’. We shall sing it through twice, please.

A new commandment

I give unto you:

That you love one another

As I have loved you,

That you love one another

As I have loved you.

By this shall all know

That you are my disciples

If you have love one for another.

By this shall all know

That you are my disciples

If you have love one for another.

Roy Crabtree

Sermon: “My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you.” John 15:12

I have worn an ichthus badge on my jacket for many years, rather than a cross or Methodist orb. As a result, I am often asked what it is, especially when I was a MHA chaplain. A couple of colleagues thought it meant that I was a member of a fishing club: I said that, figuratively-speaking, I am, but I am fishing for souls! Others wondered why I didn’t wear a cross or orb, so I pointed out that my role was to minister to all denominations, other faiths and to those who are agnostic or atheists. I wear an ichthus as a statement of my beliefs and because it makes people curious, whereas a cross is better recognised. I like to think of it as bait to start a conversation.

My raises a serious issue: how can you tell somebody is a Christian? Other faiths can be easily recognised. Practising Jews wear a kippah, a tallit and tefillin to worship, Muslims wear a prayer cap and shalwar kameeze, Sikhs have the **5 Ks – Kesh** meaning uncut hair, a comb to hold it in place, called a **Kanga**, **Kara** a bracelet to remind them there is only one God, **Kirpan** a sword and underpants known as **Kaccha**, which allowed them to move more freely in battle, whilst Buddhists often wear orange robes and males shave their heads. Certainly, while some Christians choose to wear a cross, or an ichthus, many don’t, for we really need neither symbols nor costumes if we obey Christ’s command to his disciples, **“Love each other.” Our lifestyles should identify us to the world.** It sounds so simple, to be recognisable because of our

outstanding love to one another: no badges, nor costumes, just letting Jesus' love shine through our lives. **However, this has always been a major challenge.**

Our gospel reading was part of the discourse at the Last Supper, as Christ spoke to comfort and encourage his disciples, promising the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide, reassure and strengthen them when he was no longer physically with them. In last week's Lectionary, Jesus described us as branches grafted onto the True Vine: just consider the nature of our relationship when we are joined with Christ through faith; we are friends, not servants, for what we do for Jesus is done in response to his grace, not because we're trying to win his approbation. Grace means unmerited, freely given love, **being assured that God loves us totally just as we are.** There is nothing we can do to make him love us more, nor less, so we're free to share the joy of knowing we're loved, by loving others in response.

What Jesus meant by love isn't sentimental. John used **AGAPE** Greek for boundless, sacrificial, divine love. It isn't to be used as lightly as love is often used in the Media, or popular songs, for Jesus said, **'Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.'** Christ knew that, within hours, he'd be betrayed by a friend, deserted by the rest of his followers, unjustly convicted, brutally mistreated and executed as a common criminal, yet he accepted his fate for the love of humankind. If Jesus had chosen to set aside his cup of suffering, there'd be no atonement for sin, no new covenant to draw us close to God as his earthly children, a holy people and certainly no hope of everlasting life. **Agape – total love – can cost us dearly, though rarely as dearly as it cost Jesus, but nevertheless it changes the world.**

After I spoke on this text at Sunday worship at Bridge Court, a tenant remarked how difficult loving one another can be, because even friends and families fall out. When I observed that Jesus' command really means we must love everybody, because he loves them, she was incredulous. She asked if it means we should love criminals, or the M.P.s and elements within our Media whose dishonesty has seriously undermined public faith in those institutions? Can we love violent extremists, or the brutal regimes in Iran and Syria? As hard as it seems, we are indeed called to love even them, but by no means must we like them, for loving means to be willing to care if they need help, to care enough to offer them the love of Jesus. **Let me explain.**

The great parable about **AGAPE** is **The Good Samaritan**. This parable was scandalous to devout Jews, because Samaritans were members of the Northern kingdom conquered by the **Assyrians in 721BC**. Those who weren't taken as captives into Assyria, mingled with their conquerors, intermarrying and corrupting Hebrew worship with sacrifices to **Ba-al**. Thus, when the Southern kingdom, Judah was resettled after exile in Babylon, they found Samaritans occupying land that had formerly been theirs, so they rejected a Samaritan offer to help rebuild Solomon's temple. Having been spurned as traitors to Yahweh, the Samaritans tried to frustrate the Jews' work, so an intense hatred grew between Jews and Samaritans which makes enmity between Rwandan Tootsies & Hootoos, Irish Catholics & Protestants during the Troubles and currently between Hamas and Israel seem tame. It was so bad that most Galilean Jews avoided travelling through Samaria on their way to festivals in Jerusalem, though it meant adding more than a hundred miles to the journey. Judeans felt that if even a Samaritan's shadow fell upon them they were ceremonially defiled and so would need to be ritually purified. Samaritans were just as bad, for they'd put straw into a Jew's footprints, then set fire to it to symbolise **'Good-riddance!'**

Despite the enmity between the two main characters, Jesus made the Samaritan the **'good neighbour'**, by stopping to help the injured Jew, cleaning and binding his wounds, then taking him to an inn where he paid for the victim's care until he'd recovered. Significantly, at no stage in the parable does Jesus say the Samaritan and Jew were reconciled, or even liked one another. The Samaritan was moved by compassion, or loving-kindness, **CHESED**, in Hebrew. He didn't see the injured man as a Jew, just somebody in desperate need. Though there's no mention of Jewish traveller's gratitude towards man who saved him, it is likely he'd have been so moved by the Samaritan's grace, his prejudices would have been shaken and his future behaviour modified.

Our reading from Acts shows how Peter, a Jew, recognised that the Gentiles he'd addressed at **Cornelius' house** were filled with the Holy Spirit, so they were baptised in Jesus' name, breaking down old barriers and extending God's salvation to all. God's love is **inclusive**, not **exclusive**. Look how many of **Charles Wesley's** hymns speak of redemption for all, for example, in **'Where shall my wondering soul begin?' – "Outcasts of men, to you I call, / Harlots, and publicans, and thieves! / He spreads his arms to embrace you all;"** In his ministry, Jesus reached out to such people, as well as Samaritans and occupying Romans. He set aside prejudices, offering peace and restoration of body, mind and spirit to all who responded to him. As Twenty-First Century disciples, we're called to be as warm-hearted: **to hate sin, but love the sinner.**

Remember, Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, so instead of sitting in judgment on others, we're called to pray for them to change from what they are to what Christ wants them to be and to be ready to help, if we can. In John chapter 13 Jesus declared, **"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."** May our love be a light that guides our neighbours to the side of he who is its source. Amen.

We close 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!**

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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 now and forevermore. Amen.