

16th February 2025 – Morning Service

Megan Ashmore

Call to Worship

Come, now is the time to worship. Come, now is the time to give your heart.

Come, just as you are to worship. Come, just as you are before your God, come. (StF 24)

StF 503 – Love Divine

- 1) Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.
- 2) Come, almighty to deliver,
Let us all thy life receive;
Suddenly return, and never,
Never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve thee as thy hosts above,
Pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
Glory in thy perfect love.
- 3) Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee:
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise!

Charles Wesley

Reading: Jeremiah 17:5-10 and Psalm 1

This is what the Lord says:

“Cursed is the one who trusts in mortals, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord. That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes.

They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him.

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked

or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,

but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season

and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.

They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind,

to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.”

Reflection

I love the image of the tree, planted by a stream with an ever-flowing supply of life-giving water. A tree that does not fear the cycle of the seasons or the changing climate. A tree standing firm, enjoying its surroundings, and being blessed by all its environment has to offer. I guess it is teeming with life – birds, insects, small creatures, all finding a place to dwell safely and feed from the tree's own goodness.

For a moment put yourself in the place of this tree. Plant your feet firmly on the ground. Feel God's creation beneath your feet. The earth which nourishes, sustains and heals us. Push your toes through the dark soil, reaching further to explore its depths. Draw up through your feet the water of life. Feel it refreshing your legs to go out and share the good news of the gospel. Feel it revitalising your arms and hands to serve God. Feel it cleaning your heart – making you holy for God's purpose. Feel it quenching your thirst for knowledge of Christ. Enjoy the goodness of God rising up and coursing through your veins, filling your whole being with His glory, love and grace. And as you feel that energy, maybe lift your hands in praise to the One, who created you and all the earth, reaching out to God as the branches stretch out and the leaves turn to the light.

[Pause]

Prayer

Jesus, You are the Vine, we are the branches, keep us abiding in you. Then we'll grow in your love, then we'll go in your name, that the world will surely know that you have power to heal and to save.

Almighty God, we give thanks for your son, Jesus Christ, who willingly gave up the glory of heaven to stand alongside us on this earth; to experience all that we experience and to know what it is to love and lose; be happy and hungry; be respected and persecuted. May we always honour you by following the ways that Jesus taught us and by listening to his voice in all things. **Amen.**

StF 377 – Down the mountain

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| 1) Down the mountain the river flows,
And it brings refreshing, wherever it goes.
Through the valleys and over the fields,
The river is rushing and the river is here. | 2) The river of God is teeming with life,
And all who touch it can be revived;
And all who linger on this river's shore
Will come back thirsting for more of the Lord. |
| Ch) <i>The river of God sets our feet to dancing,
The river of God fills our hearts with cheer.
The river of God fills our mouths with laughter,
And we rejoice, for the river is here.</i> | 3) Up to the mountain we love to go,
To find the presence of the Lord;
Along the banks of the river we run,
We dance with laughter, giving praise to the Son. |

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Reading: Luke 6: 12 - 26

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

Looking at his disciples, he said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.'

Reflection

Have you ever played the game "Would you rather?" Played as a party game or used as an ice breaker, individuals are challenged to consider which situation of two they would rather experience and why. So for example, would you rather

- watch your favourite film every day for a year or eat your favourite meal every day for a year?
- have the power of flight or the power of invisibility?
- always hop on one foot or always walk backwards?

And one more. Would you rather be rich, well-fed, happy and respected, or poor, hungry, sad and insulted? I think on the face of it most of us would choose the first option, to be rich, well-fed, happy and respected. But our gospel reading this morning, the very words of Jesus, encourages us to think again. Jesus says, "*Blessed are you who are poor, Blessed are you who hunger now, Blessed are you who weep now, Blessed are you when people hate you.*" What? A difficult passage if we take it out of context – so let's spend a few minutes unpacking the reading and establishing a few facts.

Looking back to the beginning of this chapter, we note that Jesus has had a couple of recent run-ins with the Pharisees about the Sabbath day. On one occasion Jesus and his disciples were going through the grain fields when the disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. On any other day this would be acceptable, but as it was the Sabbath, it was not. On the Sabbath, no work was permitted. By their actions they were breaking at least four of the thirty-nine rules related to working – reaping; winnowing; threshing and preparing a meal!! In the next account we are given details about how Jesus compassionately healed a man with a withered hand, enabling him, we assume, to be restored to life in all its fulness. Again this healing miracle was performed on a Sabbath and again, in the eyes of the Pharisaical law, was deemed to be work. No accusations were made by the Pharisees directly this time, but looking for a reason to accuse Jesus they were scrutinising his every action. Aware of this, Jesus performed the miracle openly and the man was healed. How sad that on the day dedicated to honouring God, the Pharisees were seemingly watching and waiting to catch Jesus doing the wrong thing! Actively seeking to condemn him. Not realising that God, the Lord of the Sabbath, was there amongst them.

Luke then records the choosing of the twelve apostles. Having spent the night alone in prayer Jesus carefully selects those he wants to have at his right hand, those he will train to lead the people in the ways of the kingdom. He calls them to him on the mountainside. Then having appointed them he takes them back down to a level place where he and they are faced by a large crowd of people, from far and near, who are eager for teaching and healing. Remember too, that Luke has made it clear that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were furious with Jesus and were discussing what they might do to him. So I think it highly likely that they, or people working for them, were also in the throng. And it is within earshot of this group of people that Jesus speaks the words of blessing to his disciples.

Using a bit of poetic license I wonder if the speech went something like this: "*Peter, Andrew, James, John, Bartholomew, Matthew, Judas, Simon, James, Judas, Thomas and Philip - It's going to be ok if you don't have much money for a while. You're working for the kingdom of God and the reward is greater than anything money can buy. I'm with you and God will bless you. It will be ok if we have to go without lunch occasionally, or we end up going to bed with a rumbling tum. I am the bread of life and my word will feed and sustain you and God will bless you.*"

When things get tough, and they will, remember that I know all about you. I will comfort you and give you peace. I will heal you and God will bless you. When people turn against you, and they will, look to me. I will reassure you and guide you. The power of the Holy Spirit will strengthen you and God will bless you.

Jesus is making it very clear that following him will not be a bed of roses. He is letting the disciples know that things are going to be difficult for them – they will have tough choices to make, temptations to overcome, hardships to endure but at the heart of it is God, who will bless them with His love. But Jesus also uses this opportunity to outline four warnings for those who are willing to listen. Using the symmetry of the Old Testament scriptures, with which the Pharisees and teachers of the law would be familiar, Jesus matches his teaching style and juxtaposes the blessings with a series of “woes.”

Again with a little imagination it may have sounded like this:

Be careful that you don't make yourself so comfortable with the riches of this world that you neglect to see and receive the true treasure that is God's love.

Be careful that you don't gorge on the excesses of life at the expense of feeding on the word of God.

Be careful those of you who live for a good time – what will sustain you when times are hard?

Be careful those of you who enjoy being honoured and respected – pride comes before a fall.

In a culture where traditional thinking suggested that those who had were being blessed by God and those who didn't have were being cursed, this discourse would have been hard to understand and shocking to comprehend.

The theologian and author Tom Wright commenting on this passage writes that these words of Jesus are an “upside-down code, or perhaps a right-way-up code instead of the upside-down ones people had been following.” He further comments that “when injustice is reigning, the world will have to be turned once more the right way up for God's justice and kingdom to come to birth. And that will provoke opposition from people who like things the way they are.”

I am reminded of the parable that Jesus told of the rich and the kingdom of God. When a young man asked what he must do to receive eternal life, Jesus answered, *“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”* The man left dejectedly prompting Jesus to comment, *“Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”*

“Who then can be saved?” asked the disciples. Jesus looked at them and said, *“For mortals this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”* Peter answered him, *“We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”* Jesus said to them, *“Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”*

Again, reading these passages out of context could scare us into thinking we too need to sell everything and adopt a pauper's lifestyle. But I don't believe that is what Jesus is saying to us at the moment. In all the words of Jesus that we have heard today, I think that the underlying message is that of being in a right relationship with God. A relationship built on trust and faithfulness; love and service. A relationship that puts God at the centre of our very being and our daily living.

Most churches in our circuit have recently held their Covenant service, in which congregations are asked to renew their commitment to God as they say the Covenant prayer. It's not an easy prayer. As we pray we tell God that we are no longer our own but His; that He can put us to what He will and rank us with whom He will; that He can put us to doing and suffering; that we will be employed for Him or laid aside for Him; exalted for Him or brought low for Him; that whether we are full or empty, have all things or nothing, we will freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to His pleasure and disposal.

How do we do that? We turn to God, and in the light of His countenance we find the strength to stand firm when the going gets tough. We find the mercy to be forgiven and the grace to forgive. We find the blessings that God has to give and the joy of sharing those blessings with others. We find priorities changed for the sake of Jesus Christ, His own dear son, and our Saviour, who gave his all for us; and who still intercedes for us today.

Like the tree by the waterside, we need to push further into the depths of God's word that will teach and discipline; we need to draw up the life-giving water that will refresh and heal; and we need to make ourselves accessible to others so that they too will come to know the blessings of God's kingdom.

StF 447 – Jesus be the centre

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| 1) Jesus, be the Centre,
Be my Source, be my Light, Jesus. | 3) Jesus, be my vision,
Be my path, be my guide, Jesus. |
| 2) Jesus, be the centre,
Be my hope, be my song, Jesus. | 4) Jesus, be the Centre,
Be my Source, be my Light, Jesus. |

*Ch) Be the fire in my heart,
Be the wind in these sails;
Be the reason that I live,
Jesus, Jesus.*

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Response

Blessings and woes – words of comfort and challenge. Words that should challenge us to re-evaluate our daily living. William Barclay writes *"We are here face to face with an eternal choice which begins in childhood and never ends till life ends. Will you take the easy way which yields immediate pleasure and profit or, will you take the hard way which yields immediate toil and sometimes suffering? Will you seize on the pleasure and the profit of the moment or, are you willing to look ahead and sacrifice them for the greater good? Will you concentrate on the world's rewards or, will you concentrate on Christ? If you take the world's way, you must abandon the values of Christ. If you take Christ's way, you must abandon the values of the world. Jesus had no doubt which way in the end brought happiness. It is Jesus' teaching that the joy of heaven will amply compensate for the trouble of earth. As Paul said, "This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17). The challenge of these words of Jesus is, "Will you be happy in the world's way, or in Christ's way?"*

Prayer of Confession

Shield your eyes...Lord God, forgive us for turning our eyes away from you. Forgive us for being dissatisfied with the good things you have given... Lord God, have mercy on us.

Place your hands on your lips...Lord God, we are sorry for the things we have spoken which hurt or condemn. Open our lips and we will tell of your love... Lord God, have mercy on us.

Place your hands over your heart...Lord God, create in us a clean heart. Forgive our self-centeredness and fill us with your Holy Spirit – to live for others... Lord God, have mercy on us.

Open your hands and hold your palms out to God...Lord God, forgive us for not doing the good you place before us. Help us to use our hands for your glory... Lord God, have mercy on us. Amen.

StF 706 – Longing for light

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 4) Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
Walls made of living stone.
- 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.

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Prayers of Intercession

The kingdom of God is justice and joy, for Jesus restores what sin would destroy: Almighty God, we pray that through Jesus we would be restored to our true selves – those we were created to be – that we would see the world as it should be, where all are loved and respected and cherished, and your will is done.

Bless those whose faith is faltering – restore them with your Spirit.

Bless those whose lives are in turmoil – restore them with your love.

Bless those who live in fear – restore them with your peace.

Bless those who live in despair – restore them with your hope.

May the joy of knowing you be revealed to your children today.

The kingdom of God is mercy and grace, the prisoners are freed, the sinners find place: Loving God, we remember all those suffering at the hands of others – your children starving because others are greedy; your children homeless because others are unwelcoming; your children oppressed because others seek power; your children wounded and killed because others want control. We pray for charities and other organisations working in your name to bring relief to all who suffer. Thank you for their faith and the mercy and grace they show which reflects your nature.

The kingdom of God is challenge and choice: Lord, living your way is not easy. Guide us in our daily lives; help us to make the right choices by involving you in our decision making. We pray especially for all those in positions of authority. May they seek your purpose and overcome challenges in the strength of your Spirit. We pray that the good news of the gospel will spread throughout the earth till all people everywhere repent and rejoice in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal, in Jesus begun, in heaven made whole: Heavenly Father, we praise you for your kingdom promises that will be fulfilled in heaven. Until then we pray that you will help us to follow the example of Jesus and demonstrate the working out of these promises here and now that all may come to know you and experience life in all its fullness. Lord, all we have comes from you. In your light, in your love and in your power we offer our monetary gifts that in your hands they will be transformed into acts of service and words and works that speak of the good news of the kingdom. Accept we pray, all that we have to offer today and every day that your will may be done and your kingdom come.

As heirs of the kingdom help us to answer your call, till all things cry glory to you all in all! Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

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 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.**

StF 487 – You shall go out with joy

You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace,
And the mountains and the hills shall break
forth before you.
There'll be shouts of joy, and the trees of the field
Shall clap, shall clap their hands

And the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
And the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
And the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
And you'll go out with joy.

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Blessing

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. Amen.