

## 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2025 – Morning Service

### Jesus said, 'Love your enemies'

Margaret Bradley

#### Call to Worship

We come to offer our worship to God, who calls us here, not because of any merit or claim of our own, but through gracious love alone.

#### StF 81 – Now thank we all our God

- 1) Now thank we all our God,  
With hearts and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things has done,  
In whom his world rejoices;  
Who from our mothers' arms  
Has blessed us on our way  
With countless gifts of love,  
And still is ours today.
- 2) O may this bounteous God  
Through all our life be near us,  
With ever joyful hearts  
And blessed peace to cheer us;  
And keep us in his grace,  
And guide us when perplexed,  
And free us from all ills  
In this world and the next.
- 3) All praise and thanks to God  
The Father now be given,  
The Son, and him who reigns  
With them in highest heaven,  
The one eternal God,  
Whom earth and heaven adore,  
For thus it was, is now,  
And shall be evermore.

*Martin Rinkart translated by Catherine Winkworth*

#### Prayer of Approach and Adoration

Eternal God, as we rejoice in the gift of this new day, help us to remember that you are here with us. May we sing your praise with gratitude, may we pray to you in faith, and listen to your word with eagerness. We come to offer you our worship because your being is beyond our imagination, your love is greater than we can conceive, your wisdom surpasses our understanding. But you have revealed yourself to us through your creation; through the teachings, life and death of Jesus as recorded in our Scriptures; and through our own everyday experiences. These revelations enable us to affirm that it is by you that we, and everything in the universe, have come to be; that it is in a relationship with you that everyone finds meaning, wholeness and peace; that it is to you alone that all people owe ultimate allegiance. And so, we offer you the honour and praise that is your due.

#### Prayer of Confession

Your will for us, God, is to live together, as members of one amicable family, with mutual care, co-operation and love. But we confess that there are attitudes, within us and our churches, within our society and in the world, that demonise others and which promote fear and conflict rather than seeking to diffuse disharmonious situations. Pour your love into all places where there is discord. And strengthen us to follow the teachings and example of Jesus, especially when we find it hard. As you are merciful towards us, may we be merciful to others.

#### Collect for the Day

God of infinite mercy, grant that we who know your pity may rejoice in your forgiveness and gladly forgive others, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**

## Reading: Psalm 133

Behold how good and pleasant it is **to dwell together in unity.**

It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down upon the beard,

**Even on Aaron's beard, running down upon the collar of his clothing.**

It is like the dew of Hermon running down upon the hills of Zion.

**For there the Lord has promised his blessing: even life for evermore.**

## Reading: Luke 6:27-38

'But to you who are listening I say: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.'

'Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.'

## Reflection

If it's not too painful, I invite you to spend a few moments thinking of an occasion when you, or someone close to you, has been hurt, or treated unfairly, by others. It may be physical harm; or someone who has displayed hostility, animosity, unfriendliness towards you; someone from whom you are estranged; or maybe an attack on social media. How do we deal with this?

### ***Jesus Gave a New Way of Responding to Hostility***

The instinctive reaction of most people would be an angry response which seeks to retaliate and get your own back. The Jewish Law with which Jesus was familiar operated on the system of '*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*' (Exodus 21:24). This principle guaranteed justice for the injured party, but it also protected the one who had done the injury from unlimited revenge.

Jesus tells people not to exact their rights, even in order to restrain evil. He invites people to an alternative model of relationships. Jesus says: Don't hate your enemies. Love them. Jesus says: Do good to those who hate you. Jesus says: If anyone curses you, then bless them. Jesus says: Pray for those who ill-treat you. Jesus says: Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Jesus challenges the ways in which we think and move. There is a higher example to follow and we are to do as God does.

Jesus didn't just talk the talk - he walked the walk. His enemies included the foreign, cruel, polytheistic Roman army which was occupying his land. His response to their invasive presence and hostility included healing a Roman centurion's servant. (Luke 7:1-10). There was also long-standing hatred between his compatriots and the Samaritan people, who shared the same ancestors and lived just 35 miles from Jerusalem. Jews regarded Samaritans as spiritual renegades and would have no dealings with them. Jesus was unusual in engaging in conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4:1-43) and in telling a provocative, challenging story about a GOOD Samaritan. (Luke 10: 25-37). Even closer to home, Jesus' enemies included his own religious leaders, who saw him as confronting their authority as he sought to reform Judaism by making it less tribal and more aware of what we have in common.

They got rid of this teacher they deemed to be too radical by handing him over to the Romans to be crucified. On the cross, Jesus' last utterances were words of forgiveness for those who had wronged him. (Luke 23:34).

Jesus' teaching and personal example of how we should respond to hostility is problematic and it is not the way of the world. It's not accepted by those who strongly believe in standing up for their individual or national rights. Christians have always wrestled with this teaching, which invites us to choose a different way. The principle of a just war was developed by the theologian Augustine of Hippo in the 4th century and has been used throughout history to justify military action. Other Christians are inclined to a stricter, pacifist standard, notably Quakers and members of groups like the Methodist Peace Fellowship, Pax Christi and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, of which I am a lapsed member. Donald Soper, an influential Methodist leader of the last century, had a big impact on me in my younger days. When he was a young man, Donald bowled a ball at a cricket match which hit the batsman above the heart and the man died instantly. He never forgot this tragedy and suffered badly for a while with depression at the thought that he was responsible for killing someone, albeit unintentionally. He said, 'You cannot cast out evil by evil. You can't conquer violence by more violence or fear of terror.' John Wesley, the founder, of Methodism, said 'War is a horrid reproach to the Christian name – yea, to the name of man, to all reason and humanity.'

The Christian ideal is to break the circle of retaliation. Evil propagates evil. It can only be defeated when hatred, insults, injury, are absorbed and neutralized by love. But this is seen as weakness. We ask the question, does taking revenge make restoration more or less possible? Or does it lock us into an eternal loop of violence?

### **StF 665 – Make us your prophets, Lord**

- 1) Make us your prophets, Lord,  
Who truly hear your word,  
Which fires us with your Spirit's inspiration.  
In all we say and do  
Prove that your love is true,  
The hope and source of peace for every nation.
- 2) And when we fail to love  
Or set ourselves above  
Our neighbours with their different  
ways of seeing,  
Bring us with all our pride  
Where Jesus, crucified,  
For love of all committed his whole being.
- 3) Give us his love that shares  
Our neighbours' pain, and dares  
To suffer enmity and condemnation.  
Whether we live or die  
Help us to prophesy,  
Proclaiming peace and reconciliation.
- 4) Though we live quietly,  
With no authority,  
Yet feeble faith in us may show your goodness;  
And though we may not see  
How crucial it may be,  
Our faltering love may show your  
loving kindness.
- 5) In faith and hope we pray,  
Use us to serve that day  
When bigotry and hatred are defeated,  
When perfect peace is won  
And lasting justice done,  
With love's eternal promises completed.

## Examples of Christians Today Who Have Demonstrated Forgiveness, Even Though it is Hard

A former Bishop of Birmingham, Leonard Wilson, was Bishop of Singapore at the time of the Second World War. He was captured by Japanese soldiers and imprisoned in the notorious Changai jail, where he suffered physical torture and interrogation. He spoke, reluctantly, about that period of torture. 'In the middle of it they asked me if I still believed in God. When, by God's help, I said, "I do", they asked why God did not save me and, by the help of the Holy Spirit, I said, "God does save me. He does not save me by freeing me from pain or punishment, but he saves me by giving me the spirit to bear it." And when they asked me why I did not curse them, I told them it was because I was a follower of Jesus Christ, who taught us that we are all brothers.' Leonard Wilson's witness was such that, after the war, he baptized and confirmed one of the members of the Military Police who had flogged him.

Anthony Walker was a promising student of Jamaican descent who wanted to be a lawyer, but was attacked with an ice-axe in a racially-motivated attack near to his home in Liverpool 20 years ago. His mother, Gee, moved and inspired people by her quiet dignity and words of forgiveness towards those who savagely killed her son. She made it clear that the family wasn't going to indulge in hatred. Gee said that 'Jesus' teaching about forgiveness helps to release feelings of bitterness, anger and revenge. I have to forgive them. I can't feel anger and hatred, because that is what killed my son. Unforgiveness makes you a victim and why should I be a victim? Anthony spent his life forgiving. His life stood for peace, love and forgiveness and I brought them up that way. I have to practise what I preach.' This is a remarkable act of goodness, rooted in the family's deep Christian faith. Last year Dee was honoured with an MBE for her work tackling racism, hate crime, and discrimination, and for promoting equality and inclusion for all people.

Similarly, another savage killing that shocked the nation 12 years ago, was that of Alan Greaves, an Anglican lay preacher and former social worker. Alan was on his way to play the organ for the Christmas Eve midnight mass at St Saviour's Church Sheffield when two drunk men brutally attacked him with a pick-axe handle and a hammer. He died in hospital two days later. It was a mindless, unprovoked attack. Neither of the men gave any explanation as to why they did it. Alan's wife, Maureen, said that while she was sitting at his bedside holding his fingers, her face raw from crying, she began to pray and to think, even at that stage, about forgiving those who had killed him. 'When Alan found out that I was someone who could bear a grudge he used to say to me, "We mustn't give ourselves permission to act like that Mo." And I thought that Alan would forgive them. It's Christmas Day. I didn't want to carry the anger, all that destructive anger, in my life.' In the 2015 Queen's Birthday Honours list, Maureen was awarded an MBE in recognition of her work with those living in poverty in Sheffield. She said, 'Forgiveness works. It works for us when we experience God's forgiveness for ourselves, but also when we extend forgiveness to those who have hurt us.'

These illustrations of forgiveness are truly inspiring examples of discipleship at its most authentic.

### StF 710 – Peace perfect peace

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| 1) Peace, perfect peace, is the gift of Christ our Lord.<br>Peace, perfect peace, is the gift of Christ our Lord.<br>Thus, says the Lord<br>Will the world know my friends.<br>Peace, perfect peace, is the gift of Christ our Lord. | 3) Faith, perfect faith, is the gift of Christ our Lord.<br>Faith, perfect faith, is the gift of Christ our Lord.<br>Thus, says the Lord<br>Will the world know my friends.<br>Faith, perfect faith, is the gift of Christ our Lord. |
| 2) Love, perfect love, is the gift of Christ our Lord.<br>Love, perfect love, is the gift of Christ our Lord.<br>Thus, says the Lord<br>Will the world know my friends.<br>Love, perfect love, is the gift of Christ our Lord.       | 4) Hope, perfect hope, is the gift of Christ our Lord.<br>Hope, perfect hope, is the gift of Christ our Lord.<br>Thus, says the Lord<br>Will the world know my friends.<br>Hope, perfect hope, is the gift of Christ our Lord.       |

5) Joy, perfect joy, is the gift of Christ our Lord.  
Joy, perfect joy, is the gift of Christ our Lord.  
Thus, says the Lord  
Will the world know my friends.  
Joy, perfect joy, is the gift of Christ our Lord.

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## **What About Us? What Should Our Response Be?**

Fans of the books and TV programme 'Wolf Hall' will know that Cardinal Thomas Wolsey was Lord Chancellor of Britain in 1522. He caused muster rolls to be made in every community, to show the resources that were available to defend the country. A muster roll for Cradley has survived which lists the names of 13 billmen and 4 archers. A bill was a long pike with a barb on the end so that an enemy could be hooked from his horse and finished off on the ground. The other main weapon that was used in this period was a long-bow. Ancient Greek philosophers saw hand-to hand fighting as honourable, but archers were regarded as being more cowardly because they didn't get up close to fight. Present-day weapons of warfare are able to inflict enormous damage upon people hundreds of miles away, taking away the involvement of battling close up to someone. Modern technology shields people from military operations psychologically as well as physically, making them more like a video game. Jesus' teaching on loving enemies is nigh on impossible when exercises are reduced to blips on a computer screen and people are no longer seen as human beings.

I don't have solutions as to how to make warfare today less de-humanising, but we can address a similar problem in our interactions with people in the virtual space of social media. Hurtful things can be said which cause distress to others and we need to exercise great care. If we do have things to sort out then there is something to be said for doing it face to face rather than under cover.

The person who wrote today's psalm, and Jesus, had a vision of people living together in unity, not in fear of each other, not eaten up with resentment, but respecting one another and not hurting them. Those who claim to be followers of Jesus will endeavour, not to confront but to listen, not to perpetuate wrongs but to overcome them, to work for justice and peace whenever opportunities present themselves. Overcoming enmity is achieved through building up relationships of listening, care, understanding and vision. It comes as a product of justice. And so, we need to ensure that our institutions, like the Church and Parliament, root justice, truth and integrity within their life.

We are now approaching the 20th anniversary of the 7/7 London bombings. Rev Julie Nicholson's daughter, Jenny, was killed at the age of 24 when a suicide bomber detonated a bomb in the London Underground in 2005. 8 months afterwards, Julie resigned as a vicar in the Church of England because she could not bring herself to forgive the attacker. She said, 'It's very difficult to stand behind the altar and lead people in words of peace and reconciliation and forgiveness when I feel very far from that myself.'

Jesus calls us to base our lives and attitudes on the values of God's kingdom and to adopt God's likeness. But, although we have seen some inspiring examples of Christians who have managed to be faithful to the teaching of Jesus on forgiveness, we have to recognise that it is not easy to avoid the path of harbouring ill-feeling and bearing grudges against those who have wronged us. If you are nursing a grievance or any bitterness, you might like to ask God to help you to forgive, to cleanse your heart and to heal the wound. We acknowledge our pain, and then try to let go our desire for revenge and retaliation, partly because it affects our own peace of mind and physical well-being if we don't. Jesus tells us to pray for those who mistreat us. And this may be as far as we can go. But we live in hope that we can all one day be perfected and live together as God intended.

## StF 707 – Make me a channel of your peace

- 1) Make me a channel of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me bring your love;  
Where there is injury, your pardon, Lord;  
And where there's doubt, true faith in you:
- 2) Make me a channel of your peace.  
Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope;  
Where there is darkness, only light;  
And where there's sadness, ever joy:
- Ch) *O Master, grant that I may never seek  
So much to be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved, as to love with all my soul.*
- 3) Make me a channel of your peace.  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
In giving unto all that we receive,  
And in dying that we're born to eternal life.

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## Giving Thanks

We thank you, God, for the many blessings that we have each received, for which we are truly grateful. But especially we give thanks for your great gifts towards us, in the creation, redemption and transformation of the world, through Jesus your Son and your Holy Spirit. We give thanks that Jesus showed us a new way of living and was faithful to this up to the point of death, when he offered forgiveness to those who caused his pain and suffering. We give thanks for the gift of different cultures within our society and for all those who transform enemies into friends in places of conflict and in the cause of fostering respect for all people.

## Prayers for Others

God of mercy, we continue to pray for peace on earth and for those who hold positions which enable them to work for reconciliation where there is strife. As tomorrow marks the third anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we pray for an end to that conflict. We share your sorrow that peoples living in the lands we call Holy cannot live together in unity, and we give thanks for every peace-loving Israeli and Palestinian who refuses to choose the way of oppression and violence and lives a life that challenges injustice, division and hatred. Show us all how to live as loving members of one human family, to reject the ways of revenge and retaliation and to work together for justice and peace.

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

God of love, we pray for the life and mission of the church throughout the world. We pray for Christians who are persecuted and oppressed; for the Methodist Church Reconciliation and Mediation Team; for the congregations in our Circuit and for Luke Denley as he takes up the office of Mission and New Communities Enabler. Strengthen us all in the service of Christ so that every congregation might be a community of love and every Christian a witness to your grace.

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

God of compassion, we pray for our families and friends and all known to us who are in need of our support and concern.....Draw near to uphold, strengthen and restore. Help us to be open to the pain and hurt that other people suffer and to be ready to share it. And we pray too for those that we find it difficult to love. That, in your perfect love, you might bless them. Your kingdom come: your will be done.

God of glory, we remember those who have died in the faith, including those we have reflected upon today, and those known to us whom we love but see no longer. Bring us all into the fullness of your eternal joy. Your kingdom come: **your will be done.**

Merciful God, accept these prayers, offered in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour. **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 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.

*Charles Wesley*

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!

## Blessing

Go now, to be Christ to all you meet. And the blessing of God, the all-merciful; the blessing of the Son, who showed us the costliness involved in demonstrating mercy; and the blessing of the Holy Spirit who is with us now to strengthen us in our weakness, remain with each one of us, today and for ever. **Amen.**