

23rd March 2025 – Morning Service

Olwen Meller

Call to Worship

Moses was filled with wonder at the sight of a bush on fire which was not consumed by that fire. It is a poor faith that needs miracles to sustain it. Those who are attuned to God do not need to see miracles - they are conscious of living in a world that is sustained by God's power.

StF 449 – Lord of creation

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| 1) Lord of creation, to you be all praise!
Most mighty your working, most wondrous
your ways!
Your glory and might are beyond us to tell,
And yet in the heart of the humble you dwell. | 4) Lord of all bounty, I give you my heart;
I praise and adore you for all you impart,
Your love to inspire me, your counsel to guide,
Your presence to shield me, whatever betide. |
| 2) Lord of all power, I give you my will,
In joyful obedience your tasks to fulfil.
Your bondage is freedom; your service is song;
And, held in your keeping, my weakness is strong. | 5) Lord of all being, I give you my all;
If e'er I disown you, I stumble and fall;
But led in your service your word to obey,
I'll walk in your freedom to the end of the way. |
| 3) Lord of all wisdom, I give you my mind,
Rich truth that surpasses my knowledge to find;
What eye has not seen and what ear
has not heard
Is taught by your Spirit and shines
from your word. | |

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Opening Prayers

Lord God, we, your people, acknowledge your lordship over your world, over your Church and over our lives. We come before you in homage, in wonder, and in trust, trusting that the presence of your life-giving Spirit will transform our worship, into an offering worthy of the Lord of Lords.

We cannot invite you to our worship Lord - for you are always here before us. We cannot take you into the world - for you have gone there before us. Wherever we are - you are there. Wherever we fail to go - you are there. So in every place and at any time we have confidence to call out your name and know that you are present. Here and now - in this chosen place - we make our prayer. Come Lord Jesus - come and be with us.

Your power Lord God is greater than anything we can imagine yet you do not overpower us. You express your will in the person of Jesus and call us to follow.

Jesus, you were a friend to the disciples; you taught them, you guided them, you loved them. As we meet in worship, teach us, guide us, love us. You were a friend to the outcast and sinner; you called them, you challenged them, you forgave them. As we pray to you, call us, challenge us, forgive us.

Jesus, you were a friend to the sick; you touched them, healed them, restored them. As we seek you today, touch us, heal us, restore us.

You are our friend. Bind us to each other and to you so that your love for us may be reflected in our love for all. **Amen**

StF 443 – Come let us sing of a wonderful love

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| 1) Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,
Tender and true;
Out of the heart of the Father above,
Streaming to me and to you:
Wonderful love
Dwells in the heart of the Father above. | 3) Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;
Why do they roam?
Love only waits to forgive and forget;
Home, weary wanderer, home!
Wonderful love
Dwells in the heart of the Father above. |
| 2) Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,
Joyfully came;
Came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,
Sharing their sorrow and shame;
Seeking the lost,
Saving, redeeming at measureless cost. | 4) Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,
Come and abide,
Lifting my life, till it rises above
Envy and falsehood and pride,
Seeking to be
Lowly and humble, a learner of thee. |

Robert Walmsley

Reading: Exodus 3:1 - 8 & 13 - 15

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.” “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

The Lord said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.”

Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.”

First Reflection – the Burning Bush

What comes across in the incident of the burning bush is God’s concern for his people. Fire is a symbol of love. God has heard the cries his people and sends Moses to deliver them. What was it that God saw in Moses that made him the right man to lead Israel out of slavery into freedom?

The Bible doesn’t tell us much about the youthful Moses. It doesn’t tell us whether he was good or pious but it does tell us about three episodes in his life prior to the revelation in the burning bush. On one occasion Moses saw an Egyptian attacking an Israelite and intervened on behalf of the Israelite. Unfortunately, he over-reacted and killed the Egyptian. The next day he saw an Israelite attacking a fellow Israelite. Again he intervened but this time he was told to mind his own business.

On yet another occasion he saw Midianite shepherds preventing Jethro's daughter from watering their flocks. He intervened and watered their flocks for them.

All these incidents lead us to the same conclusion. They tell us something very important about Moses, namely, that he was a man who showed concern for others. We mustn't think that God approved of him killing the Egyptian but he didn't write him off because of it. God saw that he had this outstanding quality. He was the sort of man that couldn't stand idly by when he saw an injustice happening or a crime being committed. It was because of this quality that God chose him to lead his people from slavery to freedom. Of course Moses would have to change. One thing he would have to do was control his fiery temper.

Some people have little or no understanding of the divided nature of each human being. Their hero must be perfect. As soon as they discover a weakness in someone they write that person off. But just because a person has a past it doesn't mean that they can't have a future. Human beings are complex creatures. They are a strange mixture of good and evil and the roots of good are so entwined with the roots of evil that one can't be pulled up without pulling out the other. In the parable of the Sower, didn't Jesus say not to pull up the weeds because you might pull up the good seeds as well. Let them grow together until harvest time.

It takes wisdom to recognise the frailty of the human character, the occasional unreliability of even the best people and, sometimes, unexpected goodness in even the worst. A person will not be judged by a single act or stage in his life, but by his whole life. That is why judgment cannot come until the end and that judgment is for God, not us.

StF 473 – Moses I know you're the man

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| 1) 'Moses, I know you're the man,' The Lord said.
'You're going to work out my plan,'
The Lord said.
'Lead all the Israelites out of slavery,
And I shall make them a wandering race
Called the People of God.' | 3) 'No matter what you may do,' The Lord said,
'I shall be faithful and true,' The Lord said.
'My love will strengthen you as you go along,
For you're my travelling, wandering race,
You're the People of God.' |
| Ch) <i>So every day,
We're on our way,
For we're a travelling, wandering race,
We're the People of God.</i> | 4) 'Look at the birds in the air,' The Lord said,
'They fly unhampered by care,' The Lord said.
'You will move easier if you're travelling light,
For you're a wandering, vagabond race,
You're the People of God.' |
| 2) 'Don't get too set in your ways,' The Lord said.
'Each step is only a phase,' The Lord said.
'I'll go before you and I shall be a sign
To guide my travelling, wandering race;
You're the People of God.' | 5) 'Foxes have places to go,' The Lord said,
'But I've no home here below,' The Lord said.
'So if you want to be with me all your days,
Keep up the moving and travelling on,
You're the People of God.' |

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Reading: Luke 13:1 - 9

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

Second Reflection – the Parable of the Fig Tree

This reading is divided into two parts; verses 1 - 5 and verses 6 – 9. The early part of the passage refers to two events that were probably very familiar to those listening, the details of which have been lost to time. The grisly mention of Pilate mixing the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices seems to refer to the massacre of some Galilean pilgrims who came to Jerusalem but I can’t tell you any more than that. We are not told why Pilate slaughtered these people but it’s not surprising as history records lots of incidents of his brutality long before the time of Jesus’s trial.

With regard to the eighteen who died when the tower of Siloam fell, Jesus was probably referring to an incident when a tower in the wall around Jerusalem collapsed without warning and eighteen people were crushed, but again I know no more than that - that’s all I’ve managed to find out.

Jesus seizes on two calamities that may have been the subject of discussion amongst the local people, one an instance of state sanctioned terror and one a random accident. Both saw people killed with little warning and for no clearly apparent reason. Both things lead us to realise just how precarious our existence is. We only have to look at the situation in Ukraine at the moment. What have they done to deserve it? Nothing.

Jesus implies that in these tragedies the victims did nothing wrong. Nothing that caused their demise and yet somehow these things happen. Life is fragile. But Jesus turns our attention away from disasters, victims and ‘why’, to speak to those of us who have, so far, survived the hazards of life and of society at large. But we mustn’t think that because we are still here to tell the tale that God has bestowed on us some special blessing. Jesus was simply reminding us that life is short and he wants to talk about repentance. When Jesus says *‘unless you repent you will all perish like the others did’* he doesn’t promise that the godless will suddenly be struck by something from outer space or that those who do repent will sail through life without any problems as we would all like to do.

To make his point clear Jesus tells the story of the fig tree, the vineyard owner and the gardener who took care of the vineyard. The vineyard owner represents God, the one who rightly expects to see fruit on his tree and decides to destroy it when he finds none (although I find that a little difficult to comprehend) and the gardener or vineyard keeper, who cares for the trees, feeding and watering them to bring them to their peak of fruitfulness, represents Jesus. The fig tree represents the nation of Israel but it also represents the individual.

As the story unfolds we see the vineyard owner expressing his disappointment at the fruitless tree. He has looked for fruit from this tree for three years and has found none, despite the work initially of John the Baptist and then of Jesus. John the Baptist was on the scene for three years before Jesus began his ministry. This parable reinforces ideas from this passage; a cultivated yet unproductive tree may continue to live even without bearing fruit only because it has been given a second chance to do what it is supposed to do. John the Baptist warned the people about the Messiah coming and told them to bring forth fruits fit for repentance because, in his words, the axe was already laid at the root of the tree and every tree that didn’t bear fruit would be cut down. But the Jews were offended by the idea that they needed to repent and they rejected the Messiah because He too demanded repentance from them.

Jesus’ words about judgment and repentance are scary yet they depict human life as a gift, albeit a fragile one. Vulnerable creatures that we are we can do little to preserve ourselves. The Pharisees had no time for sinners; they believed that sinners should just be written off but Jesus didn’t agree.

In this parable we see a big contrast between the attitude of the vineyard owner and the attitude of the gardener. The attitude of the vineyard owner was 'Chop down the tree - it is only taking up space.' It's an attitude that seems reasonable but it's the attitude of a person who didn't care about the tree itself. He had done nothing for the tree. He had put nothing of himself into caring for it. He was only interested in the end product, figs. Chopping down the tree was the easy option. That way he didn't have to look after it or do anything to make it become fruitful.

The attitude of the gardener was very different. He was a tender of fruit trees. Better still, He was a lover of fruit trees. He cared about this little tree and that enhanced its value in his eyes. The gardener also knew about fig trees. He knew that it can take a lot of careful tending for a particular tree to become fruitful. If a fig tree was barren he didn't give up on it, He tried to help it by feeding it, by enhancing the soil. The gardener's way was the way of love. Love is patient and kind. Love doesn't give up easily. Love coaxes, encourages and waits.

Jesus' way was the way of love. The pharisees did nothing for sinners but Jesus saw that they needed someone to take an interest in them, to show them the way to something better. This parable has been called the parable of the second chance. Sometimes we are not willing to give people a second chance. We tend to be hard on others until we need a second chance ourselves. The story of the church is full of fig trees that were once barren; St Paul, St Francis of Assisi - to name but two. Looking at the way Jesus dealt with sinners makes it easier for us to confront our own inadequacies. The Gospel offers hope to those who fail. Moses was given a second chance and so are we. Through God's goodness and mercy, our mistakes, our fumbblings and even our sins can become part of the process that leads to fruitfulness.

Song – Fear not, rejoice and be glad

*Ch) Fear not, rejoice and be glad,
the Lord hath done a great thing;
hath poured out His Spirit on humankind,
on those who confess His name.*

1) The fig tree is building, the vine beareth fruit,
the wheat fields are golden with grain.
Thrust in the sickle, the harvest is ripe,
the Lord has given us rain.

2) Ye shall eat in plenty and be satisfied,
the mountains will drip with sweet wine.
My children shall drink of the fountain of life,
My children will know they are mine.

3) My people shall know that I am the Lord,
their shame I have taken away.
My Spirit will lead them together again,
My Spirit will show them the way.

4) My children shall dwell in a body of love,
a light to the world they will be.
Life shall come forth from the Father above,
My body will set mankind free.

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Prayers of Intercession

Led by the Spirit, let us turn to God in prayer for the church, the world, and all those in need.

We pray for the church, called to be a witness to all peoples. Grant humility and wisdom to both ministers, local preachers, worship leaders and congregations, that they may call upon you in making decisions.

God, in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for the earth, called to provide abundantly. Teach your people the goodness of your generosity, that in sharing what we have been given, all life may flourish on the planet that is our shared home.

God, in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for the nations, called to protect their inhabitants and collaborate in the work of justice and peace. Forge bonds of compassion and mutual care across human borders and boundaries, that all the world may have enough to live. God, in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for those in need, called to receive your compassion, especially those known to us. Comfort those whose lives have been disrupted through natural disasters and human conflict. Aid communities in coming together to mourn, heal, and rebuild.

God, in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We pray for this Church, called to welcome its neighbours to the table of your grace. Bless food banks, community gardens and kitchens, and all ministries that address human need.

God, in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

We give thanks for the faithful lives of those who proclaimed your gospel in times of challenge and strife, and for all those whose lives of love and service have ended. May their witness inspire our own.

God, in your mercy, **receive our prayer.**

Receive the prayers of your people and draw all things together in your love, in the name of Jesus, who leads us from death to life. **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.**

We all have pasts. We have all made choices that maybe weren't the best ones. None of us are completely innocent, but we get a fresh start every day to be a better person than we were yesterday.

StF 416 – There's a wideness in God's mercy

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| 1) There's a wideness in God's mercy
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in his justice
Which is more than liberty. | 4) For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of the mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind. |
| 2) There is plentiful redemption
In the blood that has been shed;
There is joy for all the members
In the sorrows of the Head. | 5) But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify his strictness
With a zeal he will not own. |
| 3) There is grace enough for thousands
Of new worlds as great as this;
There is room for fresh creations
In that upper home of bliss. | 6) If our love were but more simple
We should take him at his word;
And our lives would be illumined
By the presence of our Lord. |

Frederick William Faber

Blessing

May you clothe yourselves in sincere compassion, kindness and patience.

May you be good witnesses for the Gospel by the love and joy you radiate.

May God who has called us to eternal glory in Christ, strengthen and support you with his grace. **Amen.**