

A service for 8th September, 2024. (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 130 verses 5 to 8 responsively

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.

⁶ **My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.**

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is steadfast love and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸ **It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities. Amen.**

Our first hymn was written by the wonderful Bernadette Farrell, one of several gifted modern Roman Catholic hymn-writers whose message is ecumenical and inclusive. She was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK and is a social activist as well as a hymn-writer. We shall sing hymn number 706, 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness,'

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. *Chorus:*

Christ, be our Light!

Shine in our hearts,

Shine through the darkness.

Christ be our Light!

Shine in your Church gathered today.

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. *Chorus:*

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. *Chorus:*

4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.

Longing for warmth, many are cold.

Make us your building, sheltering others,

Walls made of living stone. *Chorus:*

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. *Chorus:*

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

Let us pray

Lord of life, in the beginning your Word transformed darkness and chaos into this vast swirling universe of stars, planets and moons. You not only created life but formed ecosystems enabling life to continue. We know your wisdom and might are fathomless, as is

your love for all creation, so we are amazed that you reached out to flawed humankind, offering us guidance through the patriarchs and prophets so we could draw so close to you that we could call you 'Abba', 'Daddy'. Even when we ignored your commandments and set ourselves in opposition to you, your love for us is so great that you did not abandon us, but instead took our mortal flesh and lived among us as Christ Jesus.

He came to show us how we should live fulfilled and holy lives by his words and deeds of love, but he also came to bear judgment for the sins of the whole world by becoming the one perfect sacrifice at Calvary.

By dying Jesus broke the power of sin and when he was raised, he offers us everlasting life as his great gift of grace, not something we can grasp by works, nor which we deserve. We rejoice that death no longer has the final word, and so Lord, we come to worship you with joy and awe. May all honour, glory, power and praise be yours, now and for evermore. Amen.

We come now to our prayers of thanksgiving and confession. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'hear our prayer'. Let us pray.

Almighty God, thank you for all the good things we enjoy; for all you done for us, given and accomplished in us; for people who have guided, loved and inspired us, but most of all for your redemptive grace which we see in the life, death and resurrection of your dear Son, Jesus. Thank you for loving us even at our worst when we are faithless, unloving and unlovable.

'Lord, in your mercy' **'hear our prayer'.**

Merciful Lord, forgive us when we are self-righteous and judgmental; when we are not as generous as we ought to be with our possessions and our time; when our love for you and our neighbours is half-hearted. We say and do things that hurt others and grieve you. Help us to change our ways and restore us to righteousness.

'Lord, in your mercy' **'hear our prayer'.**

Merciful Lord, we believe that you hear and answer our prayers and have not only pardoned us, but call us to follow you without the burden of our sins to hold us back. Lord God, may the Holy Spirit teach us to serve our neighbours cheerfully and faithfully, so we honour you in the beautiful name of Jesus. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

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.

Our next hymn which takes us into our prayers of intercession was written by Graham Kendrick for the 25th anniversary of the charity Tearfund in 1993 and followed his visit to India the previous year in which he had seen the contrast between the opulence of the rich and grinding poverty of ordinary villagers. We shall sing hymn number 693, 'Beauty for brokenness,'

**1. Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,
Lord, in your suffering world this is our prayer.
Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace,
Sunrise to sunset, your kingdom increase!**

**2. Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,
Work for all people, trade for their skills;
Land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,
Voices to plead the cause of those who can't speak. *Chorus:***

*God of the poor, friend of the weak,
Give us compassion we pray:
Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain;
Come, change our love from a spark to a flame.*

**3. Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,
Cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share.
Peace to the killing-fields, scorched earth to green,
Christ for the bitterness, his cross for the pain.**

**Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams
Plundered and poisoned – our future, our dreams.
Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed;
Make us content with the things that we need. *Chorus:***

**4. Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame
Until your justice burns brightly again;
Until the nations learn of your ways,
Seek your salvation and bring you their praise. *Chorus: © Graham Kendrick (born 1950)***

We come to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Creator God, we celebrate the wonders and beauty of the world, especially because of the beauty of summer. However, we are also aware of how broken it is, often by human greed, spite, pride, foolishness and indifference, so in Jesus' name we ask you to guide and empower us as we seek to serve our neighbours. Lord, we recognize that we can't make as many changes we would like to see on our own. Nevertheless, help us serve conscientiously and, when the best we can do is not enough, then reach out and inspire people who have greater power and influence to act as well.

Jesus Christ commanded us to love one another, so the many wars that are being waged across the planet are an affront to you and a source of grief to us. We ask you to bless everyone who is working for peace: for negotiators, aid-workers and medics, particularly those who are putting themselves at risk by serving on the front line. May they enjoy success in their endeavours and remain safe in your care. We pray for a just and swift end to fighting in Ukraine, in Gaza, Sudan and Somalia where conflicts are often unreported by our Media, so their peoples can avoid the threatened famines.

Lord, may the tensions between Iran and Israel, especially with Hezbollah in Lebanon, not escalate into open warfare with global consequences. Guide national leaders to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, instead of resorting to force. May they learn to govern with mercy and justice which are the foundations of lasting peace. And Lord, remember in your mercy, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression, that they may receive the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives and find healing.

Lord we remember the victims of the recent stabbings in Southport. We cannot understand the motive of the attacker, but we pray for the whole community as it tries to

come to terms with the shocking senselessness and horror. We ask, too, that from the violent disorder that occurred after the stabbings is not repeated and communities learn to co-exist peacefully.

We pray for our church, the churches in our Circuit, in neighbouring circuits and, indeed, the World Church. May we speak of the love and beauty of Christ Jesus with one voice and to serve him in unity of mission. May the Holy Spirit guide us to employ our faith, love, gifts and graces in our discipleship, so our words and deeds steadfastly carry the gospel light to this strife-ridden and broken world.

Lord of creation, the breakdown of the ecosystem upon which we and all living beings depend is evident in the extreme weather that is affecting every continent, as highlighted by the super-hurricanes and typhoons, wildfires and floods which are causing serious damage and loss of life in many countries. For the sake of life on this planet and for future generations, help us to live in a more sustainable way by being less wasteful, by reducing pollution and using only the resources we need.

We remember people who are sick in body, mind or spirit; for all who are lonely, afraid, or in any kind of need or trouble. We pray in particular, everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear and finds bereavement unbearable. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned.
Lord, while we ask you to help us provide them with both practical support and friendship, enfold them in the warmth of your love, so they may be comforted, find healing, courage, hope and enduring peace.

Abba, heavenly Father bless us our families and our friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us share the abundance of your love, day by day, with everybody we meet, in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

In 1965, Sydney Carter wrote a hymn, based on Jesus teaching in Matthew chapter 25 verses 44 and 45. It caught the mood of the time and was often sung by folk singers as a protest song. You may not know that, during the 1950s and 60s, Sydney worked as a lyricist for Donald Swann in the famous revues of Flanders and Swann. Just think, we could be singing, 'The gas man cometh'! We continue our worship with hymn number 256, 'When I needed a neighbour,'

1. When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a neighbour, were you there? Chorus:

*And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,
Were you there?*

2. I was hungry and thirsty, were you there, were you there?

I was hungry and thirsty, were you there? Chorus:

3. I was cold, I was naked, were you there, were you there?

I was cold, I was naked, were you there? Chorus:

4. When I needed a shelter, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a shelter, were you there? Chorus:

5. When I needed a healer, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a healer, were you there? Chorus:

6. Wherever you travel, I'll be there, I'll be there,

Wherever you travel, I'll be there, *Chorus:*

And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,

I'll be there.

© Sydney Carter {1915 -2004}

Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 7 verses 24 to 37

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

“First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”

“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Then he told her,

“For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.” She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man.

After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him,

“*Ephphatha!*” (which means, “Be opened!”). At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.” Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Revd. Frederick Faber, an Anglican priest who followed John Henry Newman to the Church of Rome. Whereas John Newman founded the Oratory in Edgbaston, Revd. Faber founded Brompton Oratory, which St. John Newman described ‘distinctly second-rate’. Even saints have off-days.

Verses 4 and 5 are effectively a sermon in themselves comparing God’s grace with ours. However, my sermon will follow this hymn, so you will effectively have two sermons this morning; one much shorter than the other. We shall sing hymn number 416, ‘There’s a wideness in God’s mercy’

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.

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.

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.

4. For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of the mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

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.

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 {1814 – 63} StF

Sermon: *‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’* Matthew 15:28

Jews have an expression for someone who is in a bad mood: they say he is **oy oy miz!** Our reading from Matthew’s gospel shows Jesus to be **oy oy miz** as he arrived in the region of Tyre and Sidon, for he had argued with both Scribes and Pharisees at Gennesaret after they had criticised him for breaking Hebrew traditions, particularly the intricate hand-washing customs prior to eating. Jesus, had responded by telling them that observing Jewish traditions was not as important as following the Torah, the laws given to Moses. He said that the Kosher tradition was not anywhere as important as the Pharisees thought it was, for, in his own words, **“Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’”** The Pharisees were offended when they were told that to be righteous did not required Jews to observe Hebrew traditions, but to honour God’s commands, **‘to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with the Lord’**, for their scrupulous observance of traditions made them seem superior to others.

Almost as soon as he and his disciples arrived in the region of Tyre and Sidon, they were accosted by a Canaanite woman, who began to shout loudly at Jesus, **“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.”** By doing so, the woman broke a number of taboos, as far as Jews were concerned: no Jew would accept being spoken to by a male or female Canaanite in such circumstances, for they were traditional enemies of the Jews, their ancestors having worshipped Baal; certainly, no Hebrew woman would have dared address a strange man in public, let alone create a disturbance by continuing to cry out to him and certainly none would have referred to Jesus in Messianic terms, as **‘Son of David’** – unless, of course, she believed that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah!

Although Jesus chose to ignore the Canaanite mother, her shouting upset and embarrassed his disciples, who urged him to send her packing, so he turned to the woman and said,

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” Instead of being put off by the rebuff, the mother threw herself at his feet and asked,

“Lord, help me!” At first glance, what Jesus said next would have had him branded a racist in contemporary society:

“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” However, I feel confident that his eyes sparkled as he uttered a response that she could have expected from an orthodox Jew, for while our reading used the term **‘dogs’**, Jesus used the Greek word **kunarion** which means **‘puppies’**, not **‘kuon’**, and would have been considered provocative, rather than insulting. Jesus was testing the depth of the woman’s faith and her answer delighted him.

“Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Her answer was humble, but witty, for she had realised that Jesus was satirising the traditional Jewish position to Gentiles, a tradition that had developed after the return from exile in Babylon under the guidance of Ezra and Nehemiah. Indeed, if we go back to when the Torah was given to Israel, these words from Deuteronomy express God’s true wishes: **‘He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.’**

Jesus was clearly delighted by her answer, praised her faith, cured her daughter and certainly was cured of his oy oy miz!

This story challenges us especially when our society seems more divided into **‘us and them’** than ever. Jesus did not treat the Canaanite woman as a member of a despised group of foreigners, but as an individual with a deep desire to be helped. He cast off traditional attitudes, which his followers had expected him to observe, offering grace and mercy rather than bitter rejection. Here was the real-life version of the parable of the Good Samaritan with the Jew showing compassion to the Gentile, rather than vice versa. The passage reminds us that God loves everyone, irrespective of colour, creed, gender, or customs, not just a chosen few. Jesus lived, was crucified and was raised for all people, not just the Jews. We must avoid thinking ourselves superior to others, writing off people as ‘hopeless cases’. Instead, we are called to treat them as Jesus did with the Canaanite woman.

Don’t accept the image of young people portrayed by the Media as antisocial ‘hoodies’, getting drunk, or taking drugs, or committing acts of vandalism, in case it becomes self-fulfilling. Instead, treat young people as individuals which of course they are and you will generally be pleasantly surprised. Even the drunkard and drug addict may be seeking something to give life meaning – the Gospel message, perhaps! Many people seeking refuge in the United Kingdom are fleeing persecution or desperate poverty and want to contribute to society, not to gain at our expense. In the same way, don’t rush to condemn all Moslems because of the actions of a small number of fanatics. Remember each of us is an individual, made in God’s image, so we must treat one another as we would like to be treated. Only by being warm-hearted and open-handed can we hope to earn our neighbours’ trust.

Currently, the Disasters Emergency Committee is likely to appeal for extra donations in response to the many crises, wildfire, floods and storms that have wrought havoc in the last few months. This country, of course is under great fiscal pressure with high food and energy costs and interest rates higher than any time since the 1980s, so we may feel as beleaguered as the milkman, Tevye, was in the opening of “Fiddler on the Roof”. When he was asked for money by the village beggar, but declined to give him a coin, saying he’d

had a bad week, the beggar quipped, “**You’ve had a bad week, so I should suffer!**” It makes us stop and think. Our preoccupations with this country’s problems may even provoke the onset of **‘APPEAL FATIGUE’**, an unwillingness to be as generous as we know we ought to be. Just stop and think how many times we have had to appeal to God for forgiveness: **it is as well that he doesn’t suffer from ‘appeal fatigue’, isn’t it!**

Through Jesus Christ, God extended his loving-kindness to all people and as his followers, we are challenged to follow his example, remembering that in Christ’s heart there are no **‘dogs’** or **‘kunarion’**, except for the four-legged variety. Amen.

Although “Singing the Faith” is thirteen years old this month, I had never discovered this hymn until a fortnight ago which is a pity, because it echoes John Wesley’s assertion that ALL may be saved and it is set to ‘Pater Omnium’ – Father of all, a melody I hope you recognize: Otherwise, I’m doing a solo. The final hymn was written by Revd. Dr. Andrew Pratt a Methodist minister from Paignton, Devon with a Master’s Degree in Marine Biology – who says science and faith are incompatible? Hymn number 716, ‘There are no strangers to God’s love’.

**1. There are no strangers to God’s love,
Yet we have privatised God’s grace.
Bounded by nationhood and lies,
In fear we shrouded love’s own face.
Acknowledging our sin and greed
We come confessing common need.**

**2. These are our neighbours and our friends,
The ones who run in fear from war,
Who dread abuse by power or state,
Or seek the means to be less poor;
These are the ones we have denied,
As in each one the Christ has cried.**

**3. When people seeking sanctuary
Come to this place and need our aid,
Then in Christ’s name let’s offer care;
Through this our debt of love is paid.
God’s grace is free, this grace receive,
Let actions show what we believe.**

© Andrew Pratt (born 1948)

Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.