

A service for 11th August, 2024 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 34 verses 1 to 3

I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together. Amen.

Our first hymn was written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, at the invitation of a Methodist church in Texas, for the final service of a festival centred around worship, the arts and music in 1978. The dedication of a communion table, font and lectern was to be made during that service. The church wanted the hymn set to 'Abbots Leigh', but "Singing the Faith" uses Henry Smart's 'Bethany'. Hymn number 25, 'God is here! As we his people'.

1. God is here! As we his people
Meet to offer praise and prayer,
May we find in fuller measure
What it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us,
All our varied skills and arts
Wait the coming of the Spirit
Into open minds and hearts.

2. Here are symbols to remind us
Of our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table, font and pulpit;
Here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
Here in silence, as in speech,
Here in newness and renewal,
God the Spirit comes to each.

3. Here our children find a welcome
In the Shepherd's flock and fold:
Here as bread and wine are taken,
Christ sustains us, as of old.
Here the servants of the Servant
Seek in worship to explore
What it means in daily living
To believe and to adore.

4. Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,
In an age of change and doubt,
Keep us faithful to the gospel,
Help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication,
All we have to give, receive:
We, who cannot live without you,
We adore you! We believe!

© Fred Pratt Green (1903 – 2000)

Let us pray

Almighty God, you are the Source and maintainer of all life throughout the universe, whose wisdom and power are far beyond our comprehension. On

this summer's day, we can really appreciate the beauty and complexity of the world on which we live. Even at night the vastness of space with countless myriads of stars, planets and moons, fill us with awe at the unfathomable wonder of creation and our insignificance in the great scheme of things. Therefore, we are astonished that you should have time for such flawed and feeble beings like us, let alone honouring us by seeking to draw us close to you in a relationship in which we may call you "Abba", 'Daddy'.

Throughout our history you sought to make us your earthly children, yet we insisted on going our own way, rebelling against you and turning away from you. However, instead of punishing us as we deserved, you came to live amongst us as Christ Jesus. He not only came to show us how we ought to live, but died at Calvary to atone for the sins of the whole world and to break Satan's hold on us. Then, when he rose from death, Jesus offers us everlasting life and ensured death does not have the final. That is truly amazing grace, O Lord! All honour, glory, power and praise are yours now and forever. Take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may place you at the heart of our worship in Jesus' name. 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, 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 second hymn was written by Karen Lafferty at a point in her life when money was tight after she had given up a successful singing career in order to serve as a missionary to drug addicts and prostitutes in Amsterdam. She lived out the words of the hymn we are about to sing. Hymn number 254, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God,'

**1. Seek ye first the kingdom of God,
And his righteousness,
And all these things shall be added unto you;**

Allelu– , Alleluia: Chorus:

Alleluia, Alleluia,

Alleluia, Allelu–, Alleluia!

**2. Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
Seek, and ye shall find;
Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you;**

Allelu– , Alleluia: Chorus:

Alleluia, Alleluia,

Alleluia, Allelu–, Alleluia!

**3. We shall not live by bread alone,
But by every word
That proceeds from the mouth of the Lord;**

Allelu– , Alleluia: Chorus:

Alleluia, Alleluia,

Alleluia, Allelu–, Alleluia!

© Karen Lafferty (born 1948)

In our prayers of intercession we remember people near and far away.

Creator God, we acknowledge the wonders and beauty of the world, but we are also aware of how broken it is, often by human greed, spite, pride, foolishness and indifference. In Jesus' name we ask you to guide and empower us as we seek to serve our neighbours, but we recognize that we can't make as many changes we would like to see on our own.

Nevertheless, help us serve conscientiously, but 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.

Lord, it is your expressed command that we love one another, so the many wars that are being waged across the planet are an affront to your authority 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. We pray for a just and swift end to fighting in Ukraine, in Gaza and Somalia and for gang warfare in Haiti to cease, so their people can enjoy the fruits of peace. Lord, may the tensions between Iran and Israel, especially with Hezbollah in

Lebanon, not escalate into open warfare with global consequences. Inspire national leaders to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, instead of resorting to force. May they 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 in body, mind and spirit.

Lord we remember the victims of the stabbings at a holiday club in Southport last week. We cannot understand the motive of the attacker, but we pray for the whole community as it reels from the shocking senselessness and horror, as well as from the violent disorder that occurred as the community held a vigil for the dead children.

We pray for our church, the churches in our Circuit, in neighbouring circuits and, indeed, the World Church. Teach us to 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 and may our words and deeds of love bravely 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.

Our next hymn was originally written in Urdu during 1940, by an anonymous South Indian Christian, and set to a Pakistani folk tune. It was translated by Dermott Monahan, ten years later, for Sunday School anniversary services. We shall sing hymn number 252, 'Jesus the Lord said: "I am the Bread,"'

**1. Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Bread,
The Bread of Life for the world am I.
The Bread of Life for the world am I,**

**The Bread of Life for the world am I.’
Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Bread,
The Bread of Life for the world am I.’**

**2. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Vine –
The true and fruitful Vine am I.’**

**3. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Way,
The true and living Way am I.’**

**4. Jesus the Lord said, ‘I am the Light,
The one true Light of the world am I.’**

**5. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Life,
The Resurrection and the Life am I.’
The Resurrection and the Life am I,
The Resurrection and the Life am I.’**

Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Life,

The Resurrection and the Life am I.’ © tr. Dermott Monahan (1906 – 57) Singing the Faith version

The Gospel reading is John chapter 6 verse 35 and verses 41 to 51

Then Jesus declared,

“I am the bread of life. They who come to me will never go hungry, and those who believe in me will never be thirsty.” At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.”

They said,

“Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven’?”

“Stop grumbling among yourselves,” Jesus answered. “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. I tell you the truth, those who believe have everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a person may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, they will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” Amen.

Sermon: “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven.*” John 6:51

When major businesses like Carillion collapsed, and thousands lost both their jobs and pensions, when smaller contractors weren’t paid and went out of business, there was great indignation as senior executives walked away with fortunes. However, when they were exposed many of these people justified their actions with, ‘Everybody does it’, or ‘If I didn’t do it, someone else would’. These are simply cases of self-interest over-riding morality. This certainly seems to be the attitude of Post Office executives in the Horizon scandal.

Nevertheless, self-interest is not new: two thousand years ago Jesus fed a crowd of more than five thousand people with only five barley loaves and two fish, yet the Galilean multitude did not see the miracle as a sign that Jesus is the Messiah, God in man, not just a prophet and healer. All they saw was somebody who would provide food without the need for them to work for it. That is why they wanted to make him king – by force, if necessary – rather than work to establish God’s kingdom. They tried to persuade Jesus to provide further food, claiming that they needed a sign to believe Jesus was God’s anointed – a sign like Moses providing the Israelites with manna in the wilderness!

However, Christ was not prepared to be just a source of free food. He told the multitude that he was offering ‘food that endures to eternal life’. They, however, could see no further than their own material desires: they forgot the Scriptures of Deuteronomy chapter 8; ‘Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.’

To emphasise the point, Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. They who come to me will never go hungry, and those who believe in me will never be thirsty”, adding, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, they will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” As most of the crowd were Galileans, they knew Jesus’ family, so they were offended by his claim to have come from heaven. They were too spiritually blind to see Jesus as anything beyond Mary’s son, the carpenter. They did not recognise the signs of Christ’s divinity: all they saw was an ordinary Nazarene, one who was making outrageous claims.

Jesus did not attempt to appease them, but told them to stop grumbling and stated that without God’s call and revelation nobody can come to believe in Jesus and that only through Jesus can we see God. He observed that God provided manna for the Israelites, but it did not grant them everlasting life, whereas the spiritual food Jesus was offering did. Our reading ended with Jesus saying that, if anyone eats the bread he offers, they will live for ever and that the bread was his flesh which he would give for the life of the world. In fact, eating the bread meant accepting Jesus as Saviour and his Good News, too; the bread which he would give for the life of the world was his own life as the one perfect sacrifice to redeem all sinners.

In Jesus, we see the Good Shepherd, the leader who is motivated by the wellbeing of his flock, rather than narrow self-interest; the Shepherd whose love for his flock is sacrificial. The bread Jesus offers is agape,

boundless, divine love: love for God the Father and love for our neighbours. The question we face is whether or not we want the bread of life more than the values our society hungers for and chases after: success in our work, or career; fame; wealth; status; luxury; holidays in exotic locations; winning the National Lottery? All these are transient aims, whereas Christ offers everybody enduring values: peace; wisdom; affection; but above all else, the security of knowing that God loves us to the uttermost, flawed though we are.

Christ's bread frees us to share God's love with our neighbours, confident that the more we share, the more we shall receive. In our reading Jesus was inviting the crowd to see the possibilities for the world if only they would believe in him. Thus, we are challenged to hold onto kingdom values and trust God to work through us, for we can create change. Holding onto kingdom values is all the more important as we seek to make a difference to the loneliness and brokenness that surrounds us. Will you share the spiritual food God gives us in abundance by caring for struggling neighbours?

May the Lord help us to be receptive to Christ's call to look outwards and to find ways to serve the needs of our community. May he give us the faith to reach out, confident that, just as God provided the Israelites with manna in the wilderness, so he will give us the resources we need as we serve others in Jesus's name. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by the Welsh equivalent of Charles Wesley. William Williams of Pantycelyn, nicknamed "The sweet singer of Wales", wrote eight hundred hymns, all in Welsh. This one was translated by Peter Williams – no relation of William – and was set to John Hughes' tune, "Cwm Rhondda", for the Welsh Revival of 1905. Hymn number 437, 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,'

**1. Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
Hold me with thy powerful hand:
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
Feed me now and evermore.**

**2. Open now the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through:
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
Be thou still my strength and shield.**

**3. When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side:
Songs of praises, songs of praises
I will ever give to thee.**

© William Williams (1717 – 1791) trans. by P. Williams (1722 – 1796)

Benediction

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