

A service for 12th January, 2025 Ordinary 1 (StF)

Call to Worship: Isaiah Ch. 9 vs. 2

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written in 2001 by Revd. Tim Hughes, who, with his wife Rachel, are senior pastors at Gas Street Church in the centre of Birmingham and have founded Worship Central, a worship training and resources centre. Tim was born in High Wycombe, but moved to Harborne as a teenager when his father became vicar of St. John's church. We shall sing hymn number 175, 'Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness'.

1. Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,

Opened my eyes, let me see

Beauty that made this heart adore you,

Hope of a life spent with you. Chorus:

So here I am to worship,

Here I am to bow down,

Here I am to say that you're my God,

And you're altogether lovely, altogether worthy,

Altogether wonderful to me.

2. King of all days, oh so highly exalted,

Glorious in heaven above.

Humbly you came to the earth you created,

All for love's sake became poor. Chorus:

3. And I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross.

And I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross..... Chorus:

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Let us pray. In the second prayer, when I say, 'Lord in your mercy..' please respond, 'hear our prayer.'

Almighty God, you not only created the universe and all that lives within it, but when human beings rebelled against you and darkened your creation with sin and misery, you sent your only Son, Christ Jesus, to save us. We remember with amazement how Christ came without status or wealth and was born in humble Bethlehem to ordinary parents. As Jesus grew among people like us, he shared our joys and sorrows, trials and temptations, our hopes and fears, yet did so without sinning, showing us how you want us to live. Through his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus has triumphed over both sin and death and death no longer has the last word. Lord, we come to pray to you in faith, sing your praises joyfully and listen to your guiding word, for you are our strength and stay in both good and bad times and we humbly offer you all honour, glory power and praise in our worship. Amen.

Amazing God, your love is beyond our understanding, for we confess that, although we want to lead good lives, we often fail to love our neighbours as we love ourselves and we fail to love and serve you wholeheartedly. At times we fail to help neighbours who are in need or trouble, though we know we really ought to. Lord, help us turn away from our wrongdoing and forgive us in Jesus' name.

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

Gracious, loving God, we believe you always hear and answer our prayers, so confident that you have already pardoned us, we ask you to help us bear the light of your lovingkindness in everything we do and say, in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

We shall say the prayer our Lord taught his disciples:

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.

Reginald Heber, the author of our second hymn, was appointed Bishop of Calcutta in 1823. However, his duties were not confined to that one city, as his title implies, but instead to much of the South Pacific, including Ceylon and Australia, for he was the only Anglican Bishop in that hemisphere. Bishop Heber's sense of duty drove him to travel tirelessly during his three years as Bishop and he died aged only forty-two, on 3rd April, 1826. We shall sing hymn number 227, 'Brightest and best of the suns of the morning'.

**1. Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.**

**2. Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining;
Low lies his head, with the beasts of the stall;
Angels adore him in slumber reclining,
Maker, and Monarch, and Saviour of all.**

**3. Say, shall we yield him, in costly devotion,
Odours of Edom, and offerings divine?
Gems of the mountain, and pearls of the ocean,
Myrrh from the forest, or gold from the mine?**

**4. Vainly we offer each ample oblation;
Vainly with gifts would his favour secure;
Richer by far is the heart's adoration;
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.**

**5. Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness, and lend us thine aid;
Star of the east, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.**

© *Reginald Heber* {1783 – 1826}

We come to our prayers of intercession for people nearby and far away. Let us pray. When I say, 'Come, Lord', please respond, 'heal our brokenness'.

Sovereign God, you are the Light of the world, our trusty guide through life and our refuge in times of trouble. Therefore, at the beginning of a New Year, we turn to you, asking for your wisdom, courage, guidance and help, so we can act as your earthly hands in this corner of your kingdom. Although the brokenness of our world threatens to overwhelm us at times, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out and inspire those with power and influence to heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Loving Lord, come to bring peace, built upon justice and mercy, to all countries. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of those who govern in the world, so that they turn away

from using violence as a means of having their own way. We pray for wise and compassionate treatment of the victims of war, terrorism, persecution and of refugees. Help them find both support and courage, so they may find healing and rebuild their lives.

We pray for just and lasting resolutions to the wars in Ukraine the Holy Land, Syria, Sudan and Somalia. Heavenly Father, hear our cry of grief for the many victims of conflicts: the lost lives; those injured in body, mind and spirit, widows and orphans and not least the many refugees who often face exploitation and vilification.

‘Come, Lord’ **‘heal our brokenness’.**

Lord of humankind, guide the leaders of the wealthy nations and the World Bank to show mercy to the people of Developing Nations, where indescribable poverty exists. Inspire them to offer practical support to break the chains of poverty once and for all, thereby granting our poorer brothers and sisters both security and dignity.

Hear our prayer, too, for those in our own country who are unemployed, homeless, or who need to use food banks to survive. Bless all who provide food for and all who run food banks, and other organizations which serve the poor. Create in our politicians and business leaders a vision for a fairer society in which the poor and disfranchised are given hope and grant that we, too, may contribute to such a great work.

‘Come, Lord’ **‘heal our brokenness’.**

Lord of shalom, we pray for people from our church, for families and friends, for people from work, or our community who are ill, lonely, confused, burdened or bereaved, for Christmastide often sharpens their pain. In a time of silence, we bring you names of people for whom we are especially concerned, confident that you will know their needs.

Loving Lord, in your grace, enfold us all in your love, wipe away the tears of failure, fear and distress, and set us free to serve you for ever.

‘Come, Lord’ **‘heal our brokenness’.**

Lord of creation, we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are affected by extreme weather.

‘Come, Lord’ **‘heal our brokenness’.**

Heavenly Father, as the New Year begins, we pray for ourselves. We don't know what others will ask of us so we pray for the Holy Spirit to guide and encourage us when times are difficult, for vision and hope to enable us to take a risk for the sake of the gospel and courage to remain true to the teaching of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Our first reading is Acts chapter 8 verses 14 to 17

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Gospel reading is Luke chapter 3 verses 15 to 22

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all,

“I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven:

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Amen.

Our next hymn was written 1973 by the prolific and long-lived Methodist Minister, Fred Pratt Green. He was asked to write a hymn, by Revd. Dirk van Dissel, a theology student at Trinity College Melbourne, as there was a scarcity of hymns about John the Baptist. We shall sing hymn number 233, ‘When Jesus came to Jordan.’

**1. When Jesus came to Jordan
To be baptised by John,
He did not come for pardon,
But as his Father’s Son.
He came to share repentance
With all who mourn their sins,
To speak the vital sentence
With which Good News begins.**

**2. He came to share temptation,
Our utmost woe and loss,
For us and our salvation
To die upon the cross.
So when the Dove descended
On him, the Son of Man,
The hidden years had ended,
The age of grace began.**

**3. Come, Holy Spirit, aid us
To keep the vows we make;
This very day invade us,
And every bondage break.
Come, give our lives direction,
The gift we covet most:
To share the resurrection
That leads to Pentecost.**

© Fred Pratt Green (1903 – 2000)

Sermon: John the Baptist

Luke’s gospel was written essentially for Gentile converts to Christianity and in our reading Luke compared John’s ministry with Christ’s. He declared John the Baptist as God’s appointed messenger who was sent to prepare the Messiah’s ground by preaching ‘**a baptism for the forgiveness of sins**’. In effect, **John was a second Elijah, the greatest of Israel’s prophets**. However, he made it clear that John was not the Messiah that some Jews believed him to be, even after Jesus’ resurrection.

John the Baptist was remarkable: the last Jewish prophet before Jesus' birth, he was wholly devoted to his calling and fearless in his honesty. He was the only child of an elderly priest whose wife and he were past the age when parenthood seemed possible. Details of his appearance, uncut hair and simple camel-hair clothing, his diet of locusts and wild honey and water, not wine, point to him being a Nazarite, somebody pledged to serve God, eschewing luxury, either for a set period, or sometimes for life. The promise may have been made by his parents, or by John himself, but it is most likely that he lived among the Essenes, a priestly sect who lived at **Qumran, by the Dead Sea**. Essenes devoted themselves to God in monastic communities. John, however, began to call Jews to repent and baptised them in the River Jordan to symbolise the washing away of sins and the granting of a fresh start by God.

John's message was often as stark and uncomfortable as his lifestyle and clothing, for he was uncompromising in his criticism of those Pharisees and Sadducees who came seeking baptism, describing them as '**vipers**' and demanding to see the **fruits of repentance** rather than a public pretence of piety. He warned his listeners that the coming of the Messiah was imminent, so they urgently needed turn away from their sins and return to God, for the Messiah would baptize them with the Holy Spirit, not water, but he would also judge those who were unrepentant. Repentance involves changing our ways, not just paying the Lord lip service. A real change in our behaviour is required when we repent.

He always spoke out against evil, regardless of the status of the evildoer. He dared to denounce King Herod Antipas, who had scandalised many Jews by divorcing his wife to marry his niece, Herodias, who was already married to his half-brother, Philip, son of Mariamne II! The Baptist soundly condemned this immoral and probably illegal union, as a result of which he was imprisoned and later executed when Herodias' daughter, Salome, was rashly promised anything she wanted by her step-father, Antipas. (Matters got even worse when Salome married Herod Antipas' younger brother, Philip – her Great uncle! Think what fun tabloid reporters would have with such a situation today.)

At the end of our gospel reading, Jesus went to John the Baptist to be baptised, but as he had never sinned, why did he insist on baptism? Jesus was not fulfilling the demands of Torah, for baptism was not a requirement for repentance. Instead, Jesus was identifying himself with flawed humanity, who needed to change their ways and to be baptized into new life. In other words, Jesus was showing that he is not just God, but **Immanuel**, God with us, God alongside us, **both fully human and fully divine**.

Our reading from Acts reinforces the universality of God's grace, for it relates how some Samaritans, who had responded positively to Philip's preaching of the Good News, being baptised in the name of Jesus. However, contrary to what usually happened at baptism in Christ's name, the Samaritans had not received the Holy Spirit, so the apostles sent Peter and John to lay hands on them, whereupon they were filled with the Holy Spirit. It may seem unnecessary to us, but for early Christians it would have been of enormous significance. Samaria was the Jews' Northern Kingdom, but after it was conquered by the Assyrians, many Samaritans married Gentiles and mixed Jewish and pagan worship, so were despised by Judeans, who would curse and spit if they used the word 'Samaritan' and deemed themselves ceremoniously unclean if a Samaritan's shadow fell upon them. To be fair, Samaritans were no better: they would put straw in footprints of passing Jews and set the straw alight as a way of saying 'Good riddance'!

Recent events remind us sharply about the divisions in society into ‘us’ and ‘them’. Following the killings of three young girls and injuring of ten others at a dance class in Southport last July, disinformation on social media led to serious riots in several parts of the United Kingdom against asylum-seeker centres and mosques, even though the attacker was neither a Moslem nor an asylum-seeker. This, of course, follows the “Windrush” scandal which has done nothing to help race relations. Early Christians, especially those with Jewish backgrounds, would have considered Samaritans the least likely of all human beings to be favoured by God, yet when they turned to him through Christ Jesus, Peter and John broke a Jewish taboo, laying hands on them – calling them brothers and sisters. In other words, God’s salvation is offered to everybody, not just to a select few, or people we like, or of whom we approve. John Wesley preached: “All need to be saved; all may be saved; all may know themselves saved; all may be saved to the uttermost.” That is our challenge; to live out the gospel message, to reach out to all-comers, so we share the Good News with them. **Preaching on its own will fail, but if our lives show the love of Christ Jesus, those who don’t know him will listen to what we say and hopefully respond to him as did the Samaritans in our reading from Acts. Amen.**

We shall conclude our worship as we sing a hymn I wrote a couple of weeks ago to complement my sermon’s message. I have set it to either “St. Magnus” or “St. Fulbert”, both of which are familiar melodies.

1. Christ came for all and died for all –

For all he rose again:

He bore for all the shame and pain:

God’s love embraces all.

2. Christ came to set us sinners free;

The once-all sacrifice,

His blood alone could pay the price

Of sin at Calvary

3. Christ offers everyone new life:

His arms are opened wide

To all, for none shall be denied

His peace in place of strife.

4. Christ came for all: the lame; the blind;

The outcast and deranged.

By his compassion they were changed

Healed – body, soul and mind,

5. Christ calls us all to play our part,

Whatever it may be:

To build his kingdom steadfastly

And serve with all our heart.

M. Rider 16th December, 2024 – based on John Wesley’s ‘ALL need to be saved’

(to ‘St. Magnus’ HP2 / STF 312, or ‘St. Fulbert’ HP823 // STF 73i)

Benediction

May the faithfulness and obedience of Mary and Joseph, the wonder of the shepherds, the steadfastness of the Magi, the rapture of the angel host and the love brought to the world in the Christ Child, keep and sustain us and may the blessing of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us evermore. Amen.