

A service for 13th October, 2024 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 103 verses 1 to 4

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy. 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.

God of Creation, whose Word brought life to our universe, whose love maintains life and through whose grace we may call you Abba, Father, we are here to worship and

adore your holy Name. Amazingly, when we turned away from you, instead of condemning us, you came as Christ Jesus, who not only taught us how live as you call us to in words and deeds of love, but was crucified at Calvary for the sins of the whole world. His resurrection broke the power of death and offers us everlasting life through him. Take away any anxiety or distraction that prevents us dwelling upon your holiness and beauty and help us to sing your praises joyfully, to pray to you in faith and to receive and understand your message today.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your gift of life, for this beautiful, self-sustaining world in which we live, for the many blessings we receive from you, but above all else, thank you for loving us even when we stray from you, for times when we are loveless and unlovable. Pardon us when we fail to answer your call, whether or not because we are too busy, or self-absorbed, fearful or plain obstinate. We don't always love our neighbours as ourselves and we are sometimes lukewarm in our discipleship. Therefore, we come to ask for both forgiveness and grace to change our ways for the better.

Faithful God, we believe you hear our prayers and have restored us to righteousness. Help us to both accept your love and to work with you to build up your Kingdom, in response to your steadfast mercy. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

We shall say the prayer that Jesus gave us:

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.

We continue with a hymn written by Colin Ferguson, a Scot who worked as a probation officer, then for family courts, contributing much to the establishment of mediation services and training for work as well as bereavement care. His hymn reflects many of the pressures of his work. He is an elder and licensed preacher in the United Reformed Church. Hymn number 629, 'God of my faith, I offer you my doubt'.

**1. God of my faith, I offer you my doubt,
For life at times seems far too dark for me,
And my belief becomes more insecure,
When worldly cares produce uncertainty.**

**2. God of my hope, I offer you my fear,
When I am scared by my anxiety,
When all I hear is suffering and woe,
In all my shadows you will walk with me.**

**3. God of my joy, I offer you my grief,
When I sink down in sadness or despair,
When in depression I cannot be touched,
I pray in all my depths to find you there.**

**4. God of my love, I offer you my pain,
When I'm alone and feel nobody cares,
In aching age or in rejected youth,
You bear my cross and dry my human tears.**

5. God of my life, I offer you my dreams,

**Light in the darkness where I hide from view,
Light in my faith, my hope, my joy and love,
Light in my life and all my life in you.**

© Colin Ferguson (born 1937)

We come to our prayers for people nearby and far away.

Lord of all, we recognize your faithfulness in meeting our daily needs and for loving us so much that you sent your Son, Jesus, to show us how to live as you want us to. We pray for our neighbours, those near to us or far away: for people who face hardship and suffering, both here and abroad. Grant us the faith and compassion to act as your earthly hands, by offering practical support to people who are in need or distress, but where the best we can offer is inadequate, we ask you to intervene, for nothing is impossible to you.

Lord of all, bring forth leaders who have the wisdom and compassion to care for the well-being of the people they rule over. Teach them to seek justice and to deal mercifully, for only when justice and mercy are present will real peace prevail. We pray for peace in the world, especially for a just and swift end to fighting between Israel, Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah, between Ukraine and Russia, besides Sudan and Somalia where conflicts are often unreported by our Media, yet where their populations are threatened with severe famines. Lord, 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. 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.

We pray for 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. Let us bear the gospel light bravely in a sceptical and sometimes hostile world.

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 is mourning 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.

Lord of life, recent terrible floods here, in Europe and the USA and wildfires on several continents, are salutary reminders about the effects of climate change and our collective failure as stewards of this planet. We offer our prayer for all disaster-stricken people and pray for them to receive swift, practical aid. Most of all, we pray that all humankind comes to recognize the need for change before it is too late, so that future generations will have a habitable world in which to live.

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 Gospel reading is Mark chapter 10 verses 17 to 31

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus said to him,
"Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not

steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.”

He said to him,

“Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said,

“You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples,

“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

They were greatly astounded and said to one another,

“Then who can be saved?”

Jesus looked at them and said,

“For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Peter began to say to him,

“Look, we have left everything and followed you.”

Jesus said,

“Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Marjorie Dobson who was born in County Durham, became a local preacher at twenty and had preached in Durham, Bristol, Bradford and Scarborough. I have asked that we sing it to number 315, “Morning Light”, as I think you may be unfamiliar with the original setting and the words are too good to be hindered by struggling with the tune. We shall sing hymn number 243, ‘A rich young man came seeking’.

1. A rich young man came seeking –

God’s kingdom was his aim.

The law had been his guidebook.

His life was free from blame.

But Jesus asked the courage

To give his wealth away.

The young man turned in sorrow,

That price he would not pay.

2. The rich men’s gifts were lavish

And made for public show.

The widow’s gift was humble

And only God would know,

In giving to the temple,

Although her coins were small,

Her gift had so much meaning

Because she gave her all.

**3. One boy brought loaves and fishes,
No other food was there,
But Jesus fed the thousands
And still had bread to spare.
The miracle of plenty
Soon spread beyond that place.
That simple gift was offered,
Then multiplied by grace.**

**4. Lord, keep our care for money
From turning into greed.
Help us to use it wisely
To meet each other's need.
For, whether poor or wealthy,
We have so much to share
And open-hearted giving
Will show your loving care.**

© Marjorie Dobson (born 1940)

Sermon: “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” Mark10:24

At the beginning of the song, ‘If I were a rich man’, in “The Fiddler on the Roof”, Tevye the milkman said, "Dear God, you made many, many poor people. I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor, but it's no great honour either! So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?" In our gospel reading, a rich young man is unwilling to give away his wealth in order to follow Jesus, even though his blameless lifestyle warmed Jesus' heart. He was one whom John Wesley might have described as an ‘Almost Christian’ fulfilling all but one condition, but being unwilling to exchange earthly treasures for spiritual riches. Three or four years ago, Geoff Beard, a local preacher for whom I have both profound respect and affection, had the misfortune to hear me preach at Kinver when I had talked about Jesus' love for the poor and marginalised. At the end of the service, he approached me with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Martin,” he said, “you spoke about Jesus love for the poor, but what about the wealthy, or even comfortably well-off? If you believe the Wesleyan Catechism, ‘All need to be saved; All may be saved; All may know they are saved and All may be saved to the uttermost’, are you excluding those who have a small fortune?” Since I do not subscribe to the doctrine of Predestination, I conceded his point, before Geoff added, “It’s not their wealth that matters, but how they gained it and how they use it”. At that point he went off for his cup of tea or coffee, leaving me to reflect on his wisdom.

One of the most misquoted sayings is, ‘money is the root of all evil’, whereas the actual statement, from 1Tim chapter 6 verse 10, reads, ‘For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.’ A report on Radio 4’s “Sunday” programme declared that for the first time there is a small majority of atheists in the United Kingdom which raises a number of points. Are people rejecting the concept of God, or are they turning away from religions, because they seem too divisive or restrictive, used by politicians as sources of conflicts or social engineering? Alternatively, is materialism leading society away from the Lord?

We certainly live at a time when scientific and technological advances are truly astonishing but they don’t have all the answers. Science and technology need to be tempered with faith-based ethics: fire gave early human beings a means of keeping warm and cooking food, but it also became a means of waging war; nuclear fission offers us a way of providing relatively cheap electricity, but it has the potential to wipe us all out. Genome research may be used to prevent or cure hereditary conditions, but

it can also be used to create 'designer babies'. We need to ask ourselves 'should we do it?' rather than 'can we do it?'

Since the COVID pandemic, many charities, especially hospices, have found that fewer people are willing to donate. Although many people are feeling financially pinched, it is disturbing that routine generosity is falling victim to consumerism, whereby people judge one another by their wealth, homes, possessions, luxurious holidays or lavish meals. Too many are taking what we have for granted: after all, if we have a failed harvest, we can buy in what we need from elsewhere. Our materialistic society has become self-dependent, so there is no room for the Lord. However, if we go to many countries in the Developing World, we can see villagers willing to share what little they have, because harvest failures lead to famines and death. How do their ethics differ? They support one another and they recognize their need of a sustaining God, who provides their needs. Perhaps that is why faith is growing in those parts of the world.

Are we, like the rich young man, living as faithfully as we can, but held back by material concerns? Jesus used a wonderful metaphor of a camel, laden with goods attempting to pass through a narrow postern gate in the city walls to show how the only way it could would be to divest itself of its load, indicating that people who depended on their wealth would find it almost impossible to enter heaven. I can think of a supernumerary minister in our Circuit, who gave up a career at a motor manufacturer that would have led to his becoming an executive with a huge salary, in order to serve Christ's call. I'm sure he has few regrets, if any. What does the reading mean for people who are very wealthy? Let me deal with two of them. Andrew Carnegie emigrated to the USA and became one of the world's wealthiest men, partly by providing the iron and steel needed in the US Civil War in the 1860s. It could be argued that growing rich by supplying the means to wage a war that killed three-quarters of a million soldiers and countless civilians was immoral; equally, you could counter that by pointing out that the Civil War ended slavery in the USA – at least in name. However, Mr Carnegie was determined not to die a wealthy man. Indeed he said, **'Man must have no idol and the amassing of wealth is one of the worst species of idolatry!'**, so he gave away millions of dollars for good causes, including establishing free public libraries in the USA, United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and most other English-speaking countries. His method was to provide funds to build and equip the library, but only on condition that the local authority matched that by providing the land and a budget for operation and maintenance.

Bill and Melinda Gates are contemporary philanthropists, who established a foundation to employ their Microsoft fortune to enhance healthcare and reduce extreme poverty across the world and to expand educational opportunities and access to information technology in the U.S.A. I accept what they do at face value, rather than subscribe to conspiracy theories about their motives. Over the past twenty years, the foundation has endowed and supported a broad range of social, health, and education developments, including the establishment of the Gates Cambridge Scholarships at Cambridge University. In Sermon number 50, "The use of money", John Wesley advocated 'GAIN all you can, SAVE all you can and GIVE all you can'. These weren't idle words, for he lived a frugal life, even to the point of wearing his hair long, rather than using a wig, It saved £4 per year, all of which he gave to the poor.

Jesus gave up the riches of heaven to save us. He lived a simple life, eschewing wealth, but he was rich in love. May we, too, not be misled by materialistic temptations, but be rich in love, too. Amen.

We close our worship with a hymn written by John Bell and the late Graham Maule of the Iona Community. As is their usual practice, it is set to a Scots ballad tune, in this case “Kelvingrove”. We shall sing number 673, ‘Will you come and follow me’.

**1. Will you come and follow me
If I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
And never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
Will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown
In you, and you in me?**

**2. Will you leave yourself behind
If I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind
And never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
Should your life attract or scare,
Will you let me answer prayer
In you, and you in me?**

**3. Will you let the blinded see
If I but call your name?
Will you set the pris'ners free,
And never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean
And do such as this unseen,
And admit to what I mean
In you, and you in me?**

**4. Will you love the 'you' you hide
If I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside,
And never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
To reshape the world around
Through my sight and touch and sound
In you, and you in me?**

**5. Lord, your summons echoes true
When you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you,
And never be the same.
In your company I'll go
Where your love and footsteps show.
Thus, I'll move and live and grow
In you, and you in me.**

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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.