

**A service for 16<sup>th</sup> June, 2024 (StF)**

**Call to worship: Psalm 92 verses 1 to 5**

How good it is to give thanks to you, O LORD, to sing in your honour, O Most High God, to proclaim your constant love every morning and your faithfulness every night, with the music of stringed instruments and with melody on the harp. Your mighty deeds, O LORD, make me glad; because of what you have done, I sing for joy. How great are your actions, LORD! How deep are your thoughts! Amen.

*Our opening hymn was written by Revd. Henry Francis Lyte in 1834 and is his version of Psalm 103. He wanted to write something that he could leave behind to 'live to the glory of God'; a hymn that would not be ephemeral. Certainly, two of his hymns, this one and 'Abide with me', have stood the test of time. We shall sing hymn number 82, 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven'.*

**1. Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;**

**To his feet thy tribute bring;**

**Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,**

**Who like thee his praise shall sing?**

**Praise him! Praise him!**

**Praise the everlasting King!**

**2. Praise him for his grace and favour**

**To our fathers in distress;**

**Praise him still, the same for ever,**

**Slow to chide, and swift to bless.**

**Praise him! Praise him!**

**Glorious in his faithfulness.**

**3. Father-like, he tends and spares us;**

**Well our feeble frame he knows;**

**In His hands he gently bears us,**

**Rescues us from all our foes.**

**Praise him! Praise him!**

**Widely as his mercy flows.**

**4. Angels in the height, adore him,**

**Ye behold him face to face;**

**Sun and moon, bow down before him,**

**Dwellers all in time and space.**

**Praise him! Praise him!**

**Praise with us the God of grace!**

© Henry Francis Lyte {1793 – 1847}

***Let us pray.***

Living God, who calls all things into being, you are the light of the minds that know you and so we have come to worship and adore you. You are the peace of the souls that trust you, the joy of the wills that serve you, the strength and stay of all who love you and so it is right offer you our praise and thanksgiving.

Loving God, in Jesus you make all things new and through your Spirit you wash away our divisions. You call us to follow you, setting before us an example of how we should

live, by loving and caring for our neighbour as ourselves, and worshipping you with joyful hearts.

Ever present God, we thank you for the life of Jesus; a life lived with integrity so that people could trust him. We thank you that he showed by his words and actions how we should love our neighbour as ourselves as well as his self-sacrifice and resurrection that broke the power of sin and death for our sakes. Thank you, too, for all the blessings you have granted us, for all that you have given us, done for us and accomplished in us. Accept our praise and thanksgiving for people who bring or have brought light and joy into our lives, for challenges and opportunities that have added to the quality of our lives and for your faithful love that will follow us for evermore. Amen.

***When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy,' please answer, 'Hear our prayer'***

God our maker, mysterious and unseen yet closer than breathing, the still and loving centre of our lives, forgive us if our hearts are not still enough to hear you, or our lives too busy to respond to your promptings. Help us to listen to your call. God our defender, you love us with a love that never fails. Forgive us when we have failed to share that love with others. You know how easily we slip into judging people by how they look, and how mean, self-centred and uncaring we can be. Speak to our hearts, so we can change our ways and lead Christ-centred, not self-centred lives.

Lord, in your mercy ..... **Hear our prayer.**

God our friend, you seek out each one of us and offer your comfort. Forgive us when we have disappointed, criticised or undermined a loved one or friend or neighbour. You see the potential in each person, yet we limit others' gifts. Teach us to love our neighbours as Christ Jesus loves them.

Lord, in your mercy ..... **Hear our prayer.**

Merciful God, you hear and answer our prayers, so confident of your pardon, we ask you to love and help us in our discipleship, so we honour you in Jesus' precious name. 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.**

*We continue with a hymn by Revd. Foliot Stanford Pierpoint, who was ordained in the Church of England before taking a post as classics master at Somerset College. Revd. Pierpoint was High Church and was outraged when some editors changed 'sacrifice of praise' to 'grateful hymn of praise' on the grounds that Christ's self-sacrifice at Calvary made other sacrifices superfluous! He was no more pleased by the change from 'Gracious God' to 'Christ our God' and I really wish editors would avoid arbitrary changes without consulting the author. This hymn was intended to be a communion hymn and was said to have been inspired by the view from a hill in Bath which filled the author with awe. We shall sing number 102, 'For the beauty of the earth'.*

**1. For the beauty of the earth,**

**For the beauty of the skies,  
For the love which from our birth  
Over and around us lies: *Chorus:*  
*Gracious God, to Thee we raise  
This our sacrifice of praise.***

**2. For the beauty of each hour  
Of the day and of the night,  
Hill and vale and tree and flower,  
Sun and moon, and stars of light: *Chorus***

**3. For the joy of ear and eye,  
For the heart and mind's delight,  
For the mystic harmony  
Linking sense to sound and sight: *Chorus***

**4. For the joy of human love,  
Brother, sister, parent, child,  
Friends on earth and friends above,  
Pleasures pure and undefiled: *Chorus***

**5. For each perfect gift of Thine  
To our race so freely given;  
Graces human and divine,  
Flowers of earth and buds of heaven. *Chorus***

© F.S. Pierpoint (1835 – 1917)

***In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of ourselves and others.***

Almighty God, we have no doubt that all things are possible for you and this is a great comfort to us in our discipleship, for we are aware how limited our own powers are. Guide and empower us as we seek to answer our call to serve our neighbours as Jesus' hands, but when the best we can do is not enough, then reach out and move people who can heal some of the world's brokenness to act instead.

We pray for our Church, churches in our Circuit and, indeed, the World Church. Teach us to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and to serve him in unity. May the Holy Spirit help us use our love, gifts and graces to guide our neighbours to accept Jesus as the friend, Lord and Saviour of the world. Help us carry the gospel light to this strife-ridden and broken world by our words and actions of love.

Jesus declared, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God', so we ask your blessing on everyone who is working for peace. We pray for aid-workers and medics as well as negotiators that they enjoy success in their work. May fighting in Ukraine, in Gaza / Palestine, Haiti and Somalia come to an end and may the tension between Iran and Israel not escalate into open warfare. Teach national leaders to negotiate and compromise instead of resorting to force. Inspire them to govern with mercy and justice which are the foundations of real peace. Lord, remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression, granting all of them the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives. May find healing in body, mind and spirit.

Heavenly Father, as the country faces a general election, we pray for all who are standing as candidates, that you will grant them a desire to serve their constituents, rather than themselves. May they serve with integrity and compassion, tempering their ambitions with desire to meet the needs of people they represent. Help us to cast cynicism aside, so we play our part in the democratic process and guide us in our choices.

Lord of creation, we know that our lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of the ecosystem upon which we and all living beings depend. The effects of global warming are evident in the extreme weather that is affecting every continent, with floods and droughts, famines, wildfires, melting ice-caps and increasingly strong storms making life increasingly difficult. For the sake of life on this planet and for future generations, help us to live in a more sustainable way by becoming less wasteful and using only the resources we need.

We pray for people we know who are sick in body, mind or spirit; those who are in any kind of need or trouble; everyone who is living with dementia and their carers and, in particular, everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned. ....  
Lord, help us to offer them both practical support and friendship, but embrace them with the warmth of your love, so they may be comforted and find healing, courage, hope and enduring peace.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us live righteous lives by sharing your abundant love with all-comers and living our Good News in words and deeds, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

*Our next hymn was written by a retired Methodist minister, Revd. Fred Pratt Green, who was born in 1903 and died in 2000. It is set to 'Ar hyd y nos', or 'All through the night'. Hymn number 124, 'For the fruits of his creation,'*

**1. For the fruits of his creation,  
Thanks be to God;  
For his gifts to every nation,  
Thanks be to God;  
For the ploughing, sowing, reaping,  
Silent growth while we are sleeping,  
Future needs in earth's safe-keeping,  
Thanks be to God.**

**2. In the just reward of labour,  
God's will is done;  
In the help we give our neighbour,  
God's will is done;  
In our world-wide task of caring  
For the hungry and despairing,  
In the harvests we are sharing,  
God's will is done.**

**3. For the harvests of his Spirit,  
Thanks be to God;  
For the good we all inherit,  
Thanks be to God;  
For the wonders that astound us,**

**For the truths that still confound us,  
Most of all, that love has found us,  
Thanks be to God.**

© Fred Pratt Green {1903 – 2000}

***The Gospel reading is Mark chapter 4 verses 26 to 34***

Jesus went on to say,

“The Kingdom of God is like this. A man scatters seed in his field. He sleeps at night, is up and about during the day, and all the while the seeds are sprouting and growing. Yet he does not know how it happens. The soil itself makes the plants grow and bear fruit; first the tender stalk appears, then the ear, and finally the ear full of corn. When the corn is ripe, the man starts cutting it with his sickle, because harvest time has come.”

“What shall we say the Kingdom of God is like?” asked Jesus. “What parable shall we use to explain it? It is like this. A man takes a mustard seed, the smallest seed in the world, and plants it in the ground.

After a while it grows up and becomes the biggest of all plants. It puts out such large branches that the birds come and make their nests in its shade.”

Jesus preached his message to the people, using many other parables like these; he told them as much as they could understand. He would not speak to them without using parables, but when he was alone with his disciples, he would explain everything to them. Amen.

**Address: ‘*This is what the kingdom of God is like.*’ Mark 4: 26 – 34**

40 years ago, my parents’ favourite escallonia bush was ruined by workmen renovating their house. I readily agreed to replant in my garden at home, but by the time I dug it up from my parents’ back garden, the roots had dried out. Despite watering it frantically, the poor shrub failed to recover: the leaves shrivelled and fell until the plant was skeletonised – a rebuke to my initial neglect.

However, as I dug up the dead escallonia, I noticed a nine-inch long shoot attached to the root, upon which were a few healthy-looking leaves. I carefully cut the shoot from the dead plant, keeping a little of the root to which it was attached, dipped it in rooting powder and planted it in the garden, hardly expecting it to last for more than a few days. It didn’t die; nor did it show any inclination to grow until the next spring when it formed a new bush with a few white flowers appearing that July. It has continued to grow, year by year and became a favourite resting place for local birds until it finally died last year. Imagine my surprise when I came to remove the shrub and found that the small shoot had expanded to eight feet in length with its diameter of six inches requiring the attention of a saw and pickaxe, not my secateurs!

The idea of God using a remnant to renew covenant with human beings is a theme that goes back as far as Noah and the Flood, but it was also used by Jesus in the second of his growth parables today. Jesus taught how, in the tropics, a tiny mustard seed can grow into a large shrub – almost like a tree, far out of proportion to the size of the seed itself. In a similar way, he said, the kingdom of God – led by the Church – would grow hugely – big enough to support birds, by which he meant that Gentiles would find a home within God’s kingdom, not only Jews. This is an important point, for the early Church was exercised about admitting former Gentiles unless they fully adopted Jewish customs and festivals. For us it is a command that we welcome everybody, irrespective of race, colour, creed, gender and politics. As Methodists that ought not be too much of a challenge, for in our Catechism, John Wesley wrote: ‘All need to be saved; All may be saved; All may know

themselves to be saved and All may be saved to the uttermost'! That belief sent early Methodists into parts of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century towns and villages that no respectable member of the Established Church would venture and Methodism, not only save but dignified people abandoned as 'hopeless cases'.

The first parable answers the question of how God's Kingdom can grow in a sceptical, often hostile world. The sower represents those who share the gospel message, like scattering seed upon the ground. Once the seed has been sown, the sower leaves the germination and growth to God. He does not know how the words of faith planted into people's hearts grow, but he trusts in God's grace to produce sturdy plants that bear a big harvest. In other words, if we do the part God asks of us, he will do the rest: we are not expected to do everything, for we need time to be – and to live for – ourselves, otherwise life would be no more than a burden, rather than a gift from God that we should enjoy to the full.

We need to recognize that the ground we are called to plant is not only regular worship in our churches, but the world in general. John Wesley was right when he declared that the world was his parish. I am not suggesting that we should preach on street corners, in fields or inn courtyards, but we should be willing to discuss our faith when opportunities arise and we might consider following up our discussion with an invitation to the people with whom we are talking for them to come to church and see what goes on. Of course, before people will join in deeper conversations, we need to establish positive relationships by the way in which we behave. Christ calls us to live with integrity and compassion, not in an obtrusive way, but quietly and naturally, avoiding the pitfalls of prickly rectitude or false piety. The church can provide other opportunities to draw in people by reaching out into the communities that surrounds us, through clubs, support groups and coffee mornings. The outreach should be for its own sake, not specifically to boost church numbers, but it can be a way of demystifying concept of what church is.

If numbers of people who attend church nowadays worries you, take comfort in the images in today's readings. We are part of God's remnant – from which he can build a new community of faith, better and stronger than we have seen for a long time. If you think that is unlikely, consider how Methodism mushroomed during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, or how the Great Welsh Revival of 1905 brought tens of thousands back to the faith. Early Methodism was established through house groups, or classes in which people supported one another as friends, praying together, studying the Bible together and building one another in faith. Mass rallies are very impressive, but the growth of faith depends upon rooting people in Christ, a little like that escallonia, so prayer groups and Bible study groups are the soil in which the roots can grow. I believe our society is due for a revival as people seek more meaning to life than they find in selfish materialism, in i'phones or in reality television. I am unsure when it will happen, but that is in the hands of the Lord and I believe the time will come.

Our challenge is to witness to the amazing love and grace of God through Christ Jesus, to sow the seeds of faith in our neighbours' hearts by our deeds as well as our words, by finding ways to serve and support our community. Seek out one local need and try to support it. If we dare to imitate the grace of Jesus in the way we live, those who do not know him will be intrigued by us and will want to discover our secret – and that helps the seed we have planted to germinate. God will do the rest! Amen.

*We conclude our worship with one of my favourite hymns, which was written by a Congregational/ URC minister, Revd. Bryn Rees in 1974. The main setting, "Tetherdown" was composed by Gerald Barnes, the organist at Tetherdown URC, Muswell Hill, London, where he was organist and Revd. Rees was Minister – so I suppose you'd call it a home-grown hymn. Hymn number 255, 'The kingdom of God is justice and joy'.*

**1. The kingdom of God is justice and joy,  
For Jesus restores what sin would destroy;  
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,  
And here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.**

**2. The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,  
The lepers are cleansed, the sinners find place,  
The outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,  
And hope is awakened in place of despair.**

**3. The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,  
Believe the Good News, repent and rejoice!  
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross,  
Our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.**

**4. The kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,  
In Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;  
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,  
And all things cry glory to God all in all!**

© Bryn Rees {1911 – 1983}

***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.