

A service for 1st September, 2024. (StF)

Call to Worship Psalm 95 verses 1 to 3

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Marty Haugen, a liturgical composer and musical performer from Minnesota. He is composer-in-residence at Mayflower Community Congregational Church in Minneapolis. The house in this hymn is Mother Church, a community, rather than a building. Hymn number 409, 'Let us build a house where love can dwell,'

**1. Let us build a house where love can dwell
And all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell
How hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
Rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions: *Chorus*
*All are welcome,
All are welcome,
All are welcome in this place.***

**2. Let us build a house where prophets speak,
And words are strong and true,
Where all God's children dare to seek
To dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness
And of symbol of God's grace;
Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus: *Chorus***

**3. Let us build a house where love is found
In water, wine and wheat:
A banquet hall on holy ground
Where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus,
Is revealed in time and space;
As we share in Christ the feast that frees us: *Chorus***

**4. Let us build a house where hands will reach
Beyond the wood and stone
To heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
And live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
Bear the image of God's face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger: *Chorus***

**5. Let us build a house where all are named,
Their songs and visions heard
And loved and treasured, taught and claimed**

As words within the Word.

Built of tears and cries and laughter,

Prayers of faith and songs of grace,

Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: *Chorus* © Marty Haugen (born 1950)

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 eco-systems 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 was written by John Greenleaf Whittier, an American journalist and anti-slavery campaigner before the American Civil War. This was not intended to be a hymn, but was part of a long poem criticising the use by Vedic priests of an hallucinogenic drink called soma. Moreover, Mr. Whittier was a Quaker and they do not usually sing hymns. Fortunately, his words were set to the melody “Repton” composed by Sir Hubert Parry, when he was organist at Repton Public School and the combination has made it one of the nation’s favourite hymns. Hymn number 495, ‘Dear Lord and Father of mankind’.

**1. Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise.**

**2. In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word,
Rise up and follow thee.**

**3. O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love.**

**4. With that deep hush subduing all
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of thy call,
As noiseless let thy blessing fall
As fell thy manna down.**

**5. Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.**

**6. Breathe through the heats of our desire,
Thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire,
Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,
O still small voice of calm!**

© John Greenleaf Whittier {1807 – 1892}

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.

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 Gospel reading is Mark chapter 7 verses 1 to 23

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus,

“Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

He replied,

“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

“These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

And he said to them:

“You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honour your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said,

“Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can make them ‘unclean’ by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of people that make them ‘unclean.’”

After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable.

“Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters somebody from the outside can make them ‘unclean’? For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of their body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”)

He went on: “What comes out of a person is what makes them ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of people’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a person ‘unclean.’” 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: “You put aside God’s command and obey human teachings.” Mark 7:8

I am a fan of musicals, one of which came to mind when I read today’s gospel reading. “**The Fiddler on the Roof**”, set near Kyiv in the early Twentieth Century, opened with Tevye and the cast singing “**Tradition**”, about a society, where everybody knew his or her station in life and did not expect anything to change, as if everything was predestined. Don’t be alarmed: I’m not going to sing it to you. The rest of the musical is about the milkman, Tevye’s daughters’ attempts to escape the straightjacket of tradition – and, of course, the heartbreak of programs that drove many Jews across Europe and to the USA. Some traditions, such as Harvest Festivals and Remembrance Sunday, are useful as they remind us not to take our food for granted and the terrible cost of the freedom we enjoy. However, some traditions, such as the Orange Order marches in Ulster each July, are neither harmless, nor helpful, because they usually belittle Republican communities and often result in violence. The same applies to restricting the priesthood in the Church of England to men until 1994. Lest we gloat, Methodism ordained female presbyters in 1974, but only after forty-two years of argument! However, it is particularly awkward when traditions are confused with law.

Many of the food and hygiene rules were formulated for the Israelites when they were nomads, for outbreaks of disease would have jeopardized the whole community. Moreover, after Jews returned from exile in Babylon, **Ezra and Nehemiah** re-enforced Torah in order to re-establish the separateness of the people from other dwellers in surrounding countries. Thus, by the time of Jesus, tradition and Torah had been twisted together, like strands of a rope, into **613 Rules of Righteousness** which Pharisees tried harder than most to fulfil by diligent observance. Unfortunately, they were contemptuous of people who failed to observe these rules and this led to a confrontation with Jesus.

The conflict arose when Jesus’ disciples failed to observe the cleansing ritual before they ate just after the third Passover in Christ’s ministry. He had not gone to Jerusalem for the festival, so Pharisees had travelled to observe him, because they envisaged him as a dangerous revolutionary – Galileans were notorious for leading uprisings against Rome. The Pharisees were looking for any deviation from Torah and they questioned why Jesus’

disciples failed to wash their hands ceremonially before they ate. Mark explained to his Gentile readers about Hebrew hygiene and food traditions. Note that I say traditions, not laws, because the Pharisees were not questioning any breach of what is **kosher**. Instead, they were challenging the disciples' breach of a deeply ingrained custom that most Jews regarded as binding as the Law given to Moses.

Jesus turned on the Pharisees with a quotation from Isaiah, declaring that they set human traditions as highly as though they were God's Law. He gave an example of how they perverted the law, '**Respect your father and your mother,**' by vowing all the money they would normally have spent on looking after their ageing parents to the temple, thus avoiding the demands of their duty to them. This vowed donation was called "**Corban**". Having silenced his critics, Jesus told the crowd that we are not made unclean by failing to observe traditions, but what comes from within us: later, he explained to his slow-witted followers that it is our sinful thoughts that defile us, not the food we eat nor, indeed, whether or not we ritually clean our hands before we eat.

What can we draw from this reading? Like all denominations – indeed, like all faiths – Methodism has quite a number of traditions and individual Methodist churches have a few of their own. **Wordsley** Methodist Church used blackcurrant squash at communions, Wordsley having been a Primitive Methodist chapel, with a strong teetotal tradition, even to the point of not using non-alcoholic sacramental wine. After the untimely death of one of our Ministers, the Rector of Wordsley agreed to take Holy Communion, but he could only use alcoholic wine! Nevertheless, most, but not all the congregation took communion and none of us were struck by lightning or turned into pillars of salt!

Methodist traditions of classes, where we support one another, study the scriptures, sing hymns with gusto and grow together are to be encouraged, as is social outreach. What isn't helpful is when Christians allow our traditions to exclude others, or when we regard ourselves primarily as members of a particular denomination, thus making a barrier to other denominations. If we do, we fall into the same trap as the Corinthians had according to Chloe's household. Paul wrote, '**One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."** **Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?**' My friends, we must not allow ourselves to create artificial divisions, when we ought to be bound together in the love of Christ Jesus, who was crucified and raised for everyone, not just people who share our views and follow our customs.

Instead, let us keep open minds and open, welcoming hearts, so we not only engage in dialogue with other denominations and different faith groups, but seek partnerships in serving some of the needs of our community. This is particularly important in this time of social unrest, following the stabbings in Southport which led to rioters attacking mosques and hotels housing asylum-seekers, because of deliberate disinformation on social media. This country has a cherished tradition of democracy in which we elect representatives to address our concerns and, if they don't, we can vote them out. Therefore, we are called to be peacemakers, building bridges in our community, not burning them! When asked what is the Greatest Commandment, Jesus replied: "**Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.**' The second is this: '**Love your neighbour as yourself.**'" **May our words, actions and lives fulfil this**

commandment and may none of our traditions become an impediment to our service of him whose grace is boundless and everlasting. Amen.

“We have no mission but to serve / In full obedience to our Lord: / To care for all, without reserve, / And spread his liberating Word.” We close our worship with a hymn written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green in 1969, headed ‘The Caring Church’. We shall sing hymn number 415, ‘The Church of Christ, in every age’.

1. The Church of Christ, in every age,
Beset by change, but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.

2. Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat,
And never live until they die.

3. Then let the servant Church arise,
A caring Church that longs to be
A partner in Christ’s sacrifice,
And clothed in Christ’s humanity.

4. For he alone, whose blood was shed,
Can cure the fever in our blood
And teach us how to share our bread
And feed the starving multitude.

5. We have no mission but to serve
In full obedience to our Lord:
To care for all, without reserve,
And spread his liberating Word.

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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 evermore. Amen.