

A service for 23rd March, 2025: Lent 3 (StF)

Lent Prayer.

Loving, heavenly Father, it is so easy to abuse our authority over others, to misuse our spiritual gifts and skills and to possess more than we need, rather than helping less fortunate neighbours. Help us to resist temptation to act selfishly and cruelly. Instead, guide us by the perfect example of your dear Son, our Saviour, who gave himself generously as the atonement offering for the sins of the world. Amen.

Call to worship: Psalm 63 verses 2 to 5

I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Martin J. Nystrom, a songwriter, was born in 1956 in Seattle, Washington. After graduating from Oral Roberts University with a degree in music education, Nystrom worked as a music director for the New York branch of Christ for the Nations. More recently he has served as a song development manager for Integrity Music, for whom he has written more than seventy songs. Our hymn which is based on the opening of the 42nd Psalm, was written in 1984. We shall sing number 544, 'As the deer pants for the water'.

**1. As the deer pants for the water,
So my soul longs after you.**

**You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship you: Chorus**
*You alone are my strength, my shield,
To you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship you.*

**2. I want you more than gold or silver,
Only you can satisfy.**

**You alone are the real joy-giver
And the apple of my eye: Chorus**

**3. You're my friend and you are my brother,
Even though you are a king.**

**I love you more than any other,
So much more than anything: Chorus**

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Let us pray

Heavenly Father, we come to you in awe and adoration, for you spoke the universe into life, bringing light and order to darkness and chaos. You made this beautiful, self-sustaining planet upon which we live and entrusted us to exercise stewardship over it. You created us in your image and have striven to draw us into the closest of relationships with you and, even when we set ourselves against you, you persevered and shared our mortal flesh as Jesus Christ, who grew up among people like us to show us in words and deeds of lovingkindness how you want us to live. By his death and resurrection our Lord broke the hold of sin and death over us and offers us eternal life through faith in him.

Thank you, Lord, for the many blessings we receive from you, for our lives, work and rest, for people who care for, guide and love us, but most of all for loving us despite our failure to live as you want us to. Pardon us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and for times when we see neighbours in need or distress but don't help them. Forgive us, too, for our failure commit ourselves to you and to serve you whole-heartedly. Help us to change our ways, so that our lives become Christ-centred, not self-centred.

Gracious and faithful God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us, but you call us to follow you once more, unburdened by guilt. Therefore, Lord, as you offer us a fresh start, fill us now with the power of the Holy Spirit to love and serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in the blessed name of Christ Jesus our Lord and Friend. 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.

We continue our worship with Stuart Townend's 1996 version of the 23rd Psalm. He hadn't intended to write a new version and was actually working on a different song at the time, which after several hours' hard work was not going well. He happened to flick to this psalm in my Bible while taking a break, a simple melody popped into his head, and the whole thing was written in ten minutes. The Spirit works in mysterious ways! Hymn number 481, 'The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;'

1. The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;

He makes me lie in pastures green,

He leads me by the still, still waters,

His goodness restores my soul. *Chorus*

And I will trust in you alone,

And I will trust in you alone,

For your endless mercy follows me,

Your goodness will lead me home.

2. He guides my ways in righteousness,

And he anoints my head with oil;

And my cup – it overflows with joy,

I feast on his pure delights. *Chorus*

3. And though I walk the darkest path –

I will not fear the evil one,

For you art with me, and your rod and staff

Are the comfort I need to know. *Chorus*

© Stuart Townend (Born 1963)

In our prayers of intercession, we bring to God our concerns for people near and far. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, although we have been blessed by living on this achingly beautiful planet, we grieve and lament about the brokenness we see here and abroad. We want to play what part we can in making the world a better place, but we recognize that our

own powers are limited and confess that at times many complex issues threaten to overwhelm us. However, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with more ability, power and influence than we possess; people who can heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Lord of the world, we grieve about the wars in Ukraine and the Holy Land and civil conflicts in Congo, Sudan and Somalia, for the destruction, suffering and death that result from our inability to love our neighbours. Lord, we pray for President Zelensky and the people of Ukraine in their peril and distress, particularly after the meeting with President Trump and for the people in Gaza, following the resumption of hostilities with Israel. Lord, we ask for a swift, just end to and for a humane resolution to these conflicts. Teach us to recognize our common humanity and your love for all, so we learn to co-exist in harmony. Guide the leaders of the nations to govern with compassion and justice, to learn to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, so that lasting peace is established on earth.

Jesus came as Lord of wholeness and wellbeing, so we ask you to hear our prayer for people in our community who are struggling with bodily, mental or spiritual health, for those who are brought low by loneliness, trouble, or need and for everybody who is mourning the loss of somebody dear to them. In a time of silence, we bring to mind those who are in special need of your care and, as we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them: Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but may the warmth of your love enfold them to grant them healing, courage, comfort, hope and transcending peace.

Creator God, forgive us for our failure to be good stewards and teach us to help play our part in reducing the harm we are doing the planet, so we may pass on a healthier world to forthcoming generations.

Holy God, we pray for our church, churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church as we face the challenges of bringing good news to an increasingly secular and hostile world. Unite us in love and outreach, so we may reveal Christ's kingdom by words and deeds of love.

Abba, Father God, look upon us, our families and our friends with compassion. Keep us safe and guide us in your holy ways. Above all, may we share the abundance of the love you give us with both friend and stranger in the glorious name of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Gospel reading is Luke chapter 13 verses 1 to 9

At that time some people were there who told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices to God. Jesus answered them, "Because those Galileans were killed in that way, do you think it proves that they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? No indeed! And I tell you that if you do not turn from your sins, you will all die as they did. What about those eighteen people in Siloam who were killed when the tower fell on them? Do you suppose this proves that they were worse than all the other people living in Jerusalem? No indeed! And I tell you that if you do not turn from your sins, you will all die as they did."

Then Jesus told them this parable: "There was once a man who had a fig tree growing in his vineyard. He went looking for figs on it but found none. So he said to his gardener, 'Look, for three years I have been coming here looking for figs on this fig tree, and I haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it go on using up the soil?'

But the gardener answered,

‘Leave it alone, sir, just one more year; I will dig round it and put in some manure. Then if the tree bears figs next year, so much the better; if not, then you can have it cut down.’ Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Frederick William Faber, who like Cardinal Newman, was an Anglican priest who became a Roman Catholic priest. Both men founded oratories, Cardinal Newman in Edgbaston, Birmingham and Revd. Faber at Brompton, London. Sadly, the saintly Cardinal described Brompton as ‘second-rate’, which is a shame as the two priest had once been friends! 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**

Address: “But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” Luke 13:5

The gospel reading began with some Judeans trying to needle Jesus by raising a case of a number of Galileans who were slain by Pontius Pilate’s soldiers when they were making sacrifices in the temple. Effectively, they were suggesting that Galileans were inferior to Judeans and, by extension, rejecting the idea that God would choose the Messiah as a Galilean. The historian, Josephus, described how soldiers had mingled among the crowds before striking down the rebel, so it is likely that the Galileans were supporters of Judas of Galilee, who twenty years earlier, had opposed both the payment of taxes to Rome and Pilate’s construction of an aqueduct into Jerusalem. Evidently, the listeners hoped to hear whether or not Jesus would agree with the generally-held view that such a fate was a sign of divine judgement upon the Galileans’ sinful ways, which would not have gone down well with fellow Galileans.

Jesus replied that the victims were not more sinful than others and deserved their fate no more than anybody else. Indeed, he added, everybody who did not repent of

their sins would perish. He pointedly asked if eighteen people who had perished when a tower on the city wall – near to the Pool of Siloam – collapsed, were greater sinners than other Judeans. The rhetorical nature of his question indicated that God's judgement is universal, rather than partisan. Therefore, everybody needs to repent, lest they perish. Christ was not saying that impenitence will automatically result in a sticky end, for we are all mortal beings and our life span is not determined by our righteousness, or sinfulness. So when he said, "But unless you repent, you too will all perish", Jesus was referring to spiritual death, separation from God, besides warning against complacency and highlighting others' sins, whilst ignoring one's own. The word, 'repent', is interesting, for the Hebrew 'Shub' means far more than saying 'Sorry'. **Shub** means to return, to turn from sin back towards God; turning our lives round, honouring the commandments to love God wholeheartedly and to love others as we love ourselves.

The parable of the barren fig-tree is a clear reference to the Jewish nation, who regarded themselves as God's chosen people, for the vineyard image was used in both the Old and New Testament. However, instead of the usual reference to grapes as the chosen fruit, this parable has the vineyard owner seeking figs of a three-year-old tree, by which time it ought to have been mature enough to produce fruit. Vineyards were established on fertile ground, walled to isolate them from perennial weeds and cultivated with loving care, so that good crops of fruit could be grown. Clearly, the owner had lavished great care upon the vineyard, as had God upon his chosen people, despite which they had not responded in kind. It is understandable that the owner would have been so disappointed by the unproductive fig-tree that he ordered it to be cut down: it is not unreasonable to expect some return for his investment.

The vinedresser represents Jesus as mankind's intercessor, appealing for a stay of judgement. He said that, if his master would grant him one more year, he would do everything he could to make it productive, but if it still failed to bear fruit, then the owner could cut it down. The meaning of the parable was that Jews had been given ample opportunities to produce fruits of righteousness, but had not done so and therefore deserved to be condemned, but Christ himself was pleading for more time, so they might turn away from a show of righteousness to faithful living. In other words, although judgement is inevitable, we are all given every opportunity to amend our ways, for God's merciful arms are open wide to embrace us to the fifty ninth minute of the eleventh hour.

Lent is a time when we are aware of the price Jesus paid to redeem us from the powers of sin and death. At Calvary, Christ became the one perfect sacrifice for all the sins of the world, so that we do not need to make sacrifices to appease an affronted God, but instead by repenting of our wrongdoing we are assured of God's forgiveness. Nevertheless, it is a daunting thought that, in order to redeem us, God's own Son was brutally beaten, humiliated, mocked by enemies and died under a Deuteronomic curse. It is a measure of God's love for sinners like us that he invested the most loved and valuable thing he had to free us from the power of sin and death. Jesus is not only our Saviour, but he intercedes for us when we go astray.

Now is the time to choose to bear fruits of our faith, to show evidence of our discipleship in our lives, by how we respect and care for others, including neighbours who are difficult to like and whose lifestyle and attitudes conflict with ours. Jesus reached out to all-comers in love: so should we. It is important that we let Christ's love shine through our words and deeds, for words alone are not enough. Remember, if our lives are not changed by our faith in Christ Jesus, then our faith is barren. **May Jesus**

continue to change us, so that every day our lives bear sweet fruits of our faith.
Amen.

Our closing hymn is a clarion call to speak up for the gospel by Canon Edward Burns. It was written in 1968 for an evangelising challenge in the diocese of Blackburn. May we, too, share good news for all in our words and actions. We shall sing hymn number 418, 'We have a gospel to proclaim,'

1. We have a gospel to proclaim,
Good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name:
We sing his story, tell his worth.

2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem –
Not in a royal house or hall,
But in a stable, dark and dim,
The Word made flesh, a light for all.

3. Tell of his death at Calvary:
Hated by those he came to save,
In lonely suffering on the cross,
For all he loved his life he gave.

4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn;
Empty the tomb, for he was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share his victory.

5. Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
By all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his church
To live for him, the Lamb who died.

6. Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.

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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.