

**A service for 27<sup>th</sup> October, 2024 (StF) Bible Sunday**

**Call to Worship: Psalm 19 verses 7 to 14**

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring for ever.

The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from wilful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

*Our opening hymn was written by a talented Catholic hymn-writer, Bernadette Farrell, a social activist from West Yorkshire, who was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK and who has contributed a number of hymns to 'Singing the Faith'.*

*We shall sing hymn number 706, 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness'.*

*Hymn number 706, 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness,'*

**1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness,**

**Longing for truth, we turn to you.**

**Make us your own, your holy people,**

**Light for the world to see. *Chorus:***

*Christ, be our Light!*

*Shine in our hearts,*

*Shine through the darkness.*

*Christ be our Light!*

*Shine in your Church gathered today.*

**2. Longing for peace, our world is troubled.**

**Longing for hope, many despair.**

**Your word alone has power to save us.**

**Make us your living voice. *Chorus:***

**3. Longing for food, many are hungry.**

**Longing for water, many still thirst.**

**Make us your bread, broken for others,**

**Shared until all are fed. *Chorus:***

**4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.**

**Longing for warmth, many are cold.**

**Make us your building, sheltering others,**

**Walls made of living stone. *Chorus:***

**5. Many the gifts, many the people,**

**Many the hearts that yearn to belong.**

**Let us be servants to one another,**

**Making your kingdom come. *Chorus:***

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

**Let us pray.**

God of Creation, you spoke our universe into being, your love maintains life and through whose grace we may call you Abba, Father, we are here to worship and adore your holy Name. You are amazing, for when we turned away from you, instead of condemning and punishing 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. Lord, take away any anxiety or distraction that prevents us dwelling upon your holiness and beauty in this time of worship in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

***In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, 'Lord in your mercy', please respond, 'Hear our prayer'.***

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 living among us as Jesus, for without him we are helpless and hopeless. Help us to respond to your goodness and grace.

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

Merciful Lord, you are faithful, true and holy, whereas we are often faithless, loveless and unlovable. Pardon us when we fail to love our neighbours as ourselves and when we are sometimes lukewarm in our discipleship. Breathe your Holy Spirit upon the embers of our faith, warm our hearts and restore us to righteousness. Help us change our ways and live as you want us to.

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

Gracious God, we believe you hear our prayers and have not only forgiven us, but call us to walk with you once more. Keep us close, Lord, so we serve you and our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, in Jesus' lovely name. 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 our worship as we sing a hymn written in 1952 by George Briggs in answer to an appeal by the Hymn Society of America to celebrate the publication of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. It seems appropriate for Bible Sunday! We sing hymn number 157, 'God has spoken – by his prophets'***

**1. God has spoken – by his prophets,**

**Spoken his unchanging word,  
Each from age to age proclaiming  
God, the one, the righteous Lord.**

**'Mid the world's despair and turmoil  
One firm anchor holding fast:  
God eternal reigns forever,  
God the first and God the last.**

**2. God has spoken – by Christ Jesus,**

**Christ, the everlasting Son,  
Brightness of the Father's glory,  
With the Father ever one;**

**Spoken by the Word incarnate,  
God from God, ere time was born,**

**Light from Light, to earth descending,  
Christ, revealing God to all.**

**3. God is speaking – by the Spirit,  
Speaking to our hearts again,  
In the age-long word expounding  
God’s own message, now as then.  
Through the rise and fall of nations  
One sure faith is standing fast;  
God still speaks, the Word unchanging,  
God the first and God the last.**

© *George Wallace Briggs (1875 – 1959)*

***We come to our prayers of intercession 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 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 they do so 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. We pray, too, for 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 learn to 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 for 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 the way we live on this planet before it is too late, so that future generations will have a habitable world in which to live.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us share your abundant love with all-comers, thereby glorifying your name, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

**The Gospel reading is John chapter 5 verses 31 to 47**

"If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favour, and I know that his testimony about me is valid. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.

I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent.

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept praise from people, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in their own name, you will accept them. How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God? But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" Amen.

*Our next hymn was written in 1968 by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, a gifted Methodist minister. It was chosen for the service at Westminster Abbey, uniting the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches into the United Reformed Church in 1972. Hymn number 346, 'Christ is the world's light, Christ and none other,'*

**1. Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other;**

**Born in our darkness, he became our Brother.**

**If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:**

**Glory to God on high.**

**2. Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;**

**No one can serve him and despise another.**

**Who else unites us, one in God the Father?**

**Glory to God on high.**

**3. Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none other;**

**Sold once for silver, murdered here, our Brother –**

**He, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:**

**Glory to God on high.**

**4. Give God the glory, God and none other;**

**Give God the glory, Spirit, Son and Father;**

**Give God the glory, God in us, my Brother:**

**Glory to God on high.**

© Fred Pratt Green {1903 – 2000} StF version

**Sermon: Bible Moths and Methodists**

How would you feel if you were called 'Bible Moths'? Well, that is one of a number of nicknames intended to ridicule the Holy Club at Oxford University in 1729. A small

number of students met regularly to study the Bible and classical writings of the Church. They aspired to follow Christ by doing charitable works, visiting prisoners, helping the poor, living frugally and establishing a small school. Members included George Whitefield, Robert Kirkham, James Harvey, William Morgan and Charles and John Wesley, the latter having graduated as a Master of Arts in 1727 and been ordained in 1728. As such, John was the leader of the Holy Club which faced ridicule from more worldly students, who not only called the Holy Club 'Bible Moths', but 'Bible Bigots', 'The Enthusiasts' and 'Methodists', the last because of the methodical way in which they studied and lived. I quite like the title 'Enthusiasts', but wonder whether there are times when we could fall foul of the Trade Descriptions Act! I think we'd better stick with Methodists.

The Holy Bible is God's word, given to us as a community, not just as individuals, so reading it with insight is important for us to understand God's story for us. The belief at the heart of discipleship is that God takes the initiative, seeks to guide us, help and save us. The Bible comes to us as the Word of God inasmuch as it tells us stories about Jesus, set in the context of ancient texts that relate about human struggling to seek and understand God and revealing God's search for us. Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection we see God's nature, purpose and redemptive love, and in a paraphrase of John Wesley's words 'May know ourselves saved and be saved to the uttermost'. We no longer need to offer sacrifices to atone for our sins, for Jesus was and is the One perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. Through faith in him, we are free to serve the Lord as a response to his grace, not because we are seeking to earn his love. It was that revelation at Aldersgate Street on 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1738 which empowered his ministry and led to the founding of Methodism.

The Bible has been described as an instruction manual for life, yet many Christians are unfamiliar with the contents and may miss out on all it offers. To begin with, the Holy Bible is not one book, but has 66 plus 18 books in the Apocrypha. It holds several genres of literature, including histories, law, poetry, wisdom writings, prophecy, parables, letters, genealogy, and apocalyptic writing. When we study the Bible, we hear God's story unfolding, as we gain insights into his story and his purposes for us. Even so, it is full of texts, some of which are complex and difficult to understand. Therefore, it can be helpful to read it together as God's people, a community where we support, encourage, challenge and love one another.

Ours is a revealed faith. We cannot find out about God unless he reveals himself and Jesus is God's ultimate revelation about his nature, person and purpose. In our reading from John, Jesus had healed a crippled man by the pool of Bethesda in the temple on the Sabbath at an unspecified festival. Instead of rejoicing at the healing, Jews who opposed him, began to persecute our Lord for healing on the Sabbath and demanded to know by what authority he did so, for not only did Jesus not fit their idea of the Messiah, but he came from a despised province, Galilee, notorious for producing activists who claimed to be God's anointed in order to lead uprisings against the Roman occupiers. In that respect, the Jewish establishment was trying to prevent what they believed to be a false claimant fomenting another rebellion with inevitable harsh reprisals from Rome. However, the religious authorities were blinded by their prejudices and had demanded Jesus provide signs that testified to his being God's anointed.

Therefore, Jesus answered their demand for his authority by remarking that if he told them directly, they would not accept his word. He said John the Baptist was a witness who pointing to his coming, but he was only a lamp to the truth, telling them to repent and turn to the True Light who would follow him. The Jews had been stirred by

John's ministry, but they thought that although their nation would be disciplined, the Messiah would destroy their enemies. John had performed no miracles, nor healings foretold by Isaiah, 'Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy', yet just before our reading, Jesus had healed a lame man. Moreover, he had healed many others, fulfilling Isaiah's words and manifesting that God had sent him. He told them, 'You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life'.

What Jesus said was true, for Jewish religious leaders studied the Torah and prophetic writings intensely, as they believed if one could comprehend the words of the Hebrew Scriptures they would gain a share in the world to come. They considered people who were ignorant of the Law given to Moses to be under a curse, yet their study of scriptures was an end in itself, rather than a means of coming to know God and godliness. The Jewish leaders expected people to observe the 613 Rules of Righteousness in order to be justified or put right with the Lord. As a result, they were self-righteous and contemptuous of people who fell short. By contrast Moses was given Ten Commandments by God, which Jesus summed up with, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength' and 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' As Paul wrote in Romans 8, 'Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for those who love his fellow-human beings have fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law'.

Christ told the religious leaders bluntly, 'I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts', that is love for God, not love from God. Their traditions and prejudices led them to reject Jesus and by so-doing, they rejected God the Father. They had set their hopes of salvation on Torah, but were rejecting the very One who was the fulfilment of the Scriptures.

The Bible is the pathway to the heart of our faith: it is a guide to holy living, for the Hebrew Bible shows how God has tried to draw us lose from the beginning of our history, but it also points to Jesus as our Messiah and Source of Salvation. Although the Hebrew Bible has some dark, difficult passages, the light of God's saving grace is apparent, too and if we really want to understand the New Testament, the Hebrew Bible helps put it in context. If you aren't involved in a Bible Study group, it is well worth considering doing so, not as an academic exercise like the critics of Christ, but through the Holy Spirit gaining a deeper understanding of the Lord's will and applying it to everyday life. As James declared in his letter to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations, 'Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says'. May we be diligent in our seeking of God's will and then may we practise what we have learned to play our part in his kingdom. Amen.

***Our closing hymn comes almost full circle, for one of its authors, Stuart Townend was raised in West Yorkshire, but his father was a vicar in the Church of England. His co-writer, Keith Getty, was raised as a Baptist in Lisburn, Northern Ireland. Keith Getty wrote this of our closing hymn: 'This song reminds us that when we fall into sin, when we are faced with difficult decisions, we can rely on God's promises to forgive, to guide, to strengthen us just when we need it. Jesus Himself***

*said we are to live not by bread alone, but by the word of God – perhaps songs like this can help us to do that’. Amen to those sentiments. Hymn number 156, ‘From the breaking of the dawn’*

**1. From the breaking of the dawn  
To the setting of the sun,  
I will stand on every promise of your word.  
Words of power, strong to save,  
That will never pass away;  
I will stand on every promise of your word.  
For your covenant is sure,  
And on this I am secure:  
I can stand on every promise of your word.**

**2. When I stumble and I sin,  
Condemnation pressing in,  
I will stand on every promise of your word.  
You are faithful to forgive,  
That in freedom I might live,  
So I stand on every promise of your word.  
Guilt to innocence restored:  
You remember sins no more.  
So I’ll stand on every promise of your word.**

**3. When I’m faced with anguished choice,  
I will listen for your voice,  
And I’ll stand on every promise of your word.  
Through this dark and troubled land  
You will guide me with your hand  
As I stand on every promise of your word.  
And you’ve promised to complete  
Every work begun in me,  
So I’ll stand on every promise of your word.**

**4. Hope that lifts me from despair,  
Love that casts out every fear,  
As I stand on every promise of your word.  
Not forsaken, not alone,  
For the Comforter has come,  
And I stand on every promise of your word.  
Grace sufficient, grace for me,  
Grace for all who will believe,  
We will stand on every promise of your 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.**