

**A service for 29<sup>th</sup> September, 2024 (StF)**

**Call to Worship: Psalm 19 verses 7 to 11**

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 forever. 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. Amen.

*Our opening hymn was written in 1979 to celebrate the bi-centenary of John Wesley's preaching in Paradise Square, Sheffield. There is little unusual about a commemorative hymn, but both words and melody of this one were composed during a train journey between London and Chesterfield and it was inspired by the opening of the 1933 "Methodist Hymn Book", which reads 'Methodism was born in song. Charles Wesley wrote the first hymns of the Evangelical Revival during the great Whitsuntide of 1738 when his brother and he were "filled with the Spirit," and from that time onwards the Methodists have never ceased to sing.' The author, Revd. Brian Hoare was New Testament Tutor at Cliff College and in 1979 he was serving as a member of the main committee that created "Hymns and Psalms". Enough said; we shall sing hymn number 21, 'Born in song'.*

**1. Born in song!**

**God's people have always been singing.**

**Born in song!**

**Hearts and voices raised.**

**So today we worship together;**

**God alone is worthy to be praised.**

**2. Praise to God!**

**For he is the one who has made us.**

**Praise to God!**

**We his image bear.**

**Heaven and earth are full of his glory;**

**Let creation praise him everywhere.**

**3. Christ is King!**

**He left all the glory of heaven.**

**Christ is King!**

**Born to share in our pain;**

**Crucified, for sinners atoning,**

**Risen, exalted, soon to come again.**

**4. Sing the song!**

**God's Spirit is poured out among us.**

**Sing the song!**

**He has made us anew.**

**Every member part of the Body;**

**Given his power, his will to seek and do.**

## **5. Tell the world!**

**All power to Jesus is given.**

**Tell the world!**

**He is with us always.**

**Spread the word, that all may receive him;**

**Every tongue confess and sing his praise.**

## **6. Then the end!**

**Christ Jesus shall reign in his glory.**

**Then the end**

**Of all earthly days.**

**Yet above the song will continue;**

**All his people still shall sing his praise.**

© Brian Hoare (born 1935)

### ***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 ecosystems 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.

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.

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.

Gracious God, we believe that you hear and answer our prayers and have not only pardoned us, but call us to follow you once more. Lord, may the Holy Spirit help 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. 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 shall now bring our concerns for other people, nearby and far away, to the Lord our God.***

Creator God, we celebrate the wonders and beauty of the world, especially because of the colours and fruitfulness of early autumn. 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 and, 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.

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.

Lord of creation, the breakdown of the ecosystem upon which we and all living beings depend is evident in the extreme weather that is affecting every continent, as highlighted by the super-hurricanes and typhoons, wildfires and floods which are causing serious damage and loss of life in many countries. For the sake of life on this planet and for future generations, help us to live in a more sustainable way by being less wasteful, by reducing pollution and using only the resources we need.

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.

*Frederick Faber was an Anglican priest who followed Cardinal John Newman into the Roman Catholic priesthood and founded Brompton Oratory. 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" version**

**Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 9 verses 38 to 50**

"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

"Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'

Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other." Amen.

**Sermon: "Whoever is not against us is for us" Mark 9:40**

This passage shows the disciple John – later called the apostle of love – in an unfavourable light. He and some other disciples had seen a man performing either healings or exorcisms in Jesus' name and tried to stop him simply because he was not one of the Twelve. Jesus' response was far kinder than John deserved, for he not only said the man ought not be stopped, but he observed that anyone who does good in his name is hardly likely to be an enemy, or is likely to say anything defamatory about him. He pressed home the point that **"Whoever is not against us is for us."** In other words, the works of the Holy Spirit should not be opposed, for they glorify both Jesus and God the Father. Indeed, Jesus could easily have turned on John and demanded to know who he thought he was, deciding who could and could not follow him.

This story has an important message for all of us, for it deals with being part of the 'in-crowd' and being an outsider. It is too easy to exclude others from friendship groups, societies, clubs and activities for the flimsiest of reasons. Prejudice can raise its ugly head even in primary schools where children who are overweight, ginger-haired, bespectacled, or asthmatic may be isolated because they are deemed 'different'. One of the most notorious incidents of prejudice was the treatment of a number of Christians who came to this country from Jamaica on **"SS Windrush" in 1948**. Naturally, they wanted to worship, so they went to churches where they'd disembarked. At the end of one service, the vicar greeted them as they left, saying,

**“It was very nice to see you here today, but please don’t come again. You have upset the congregation by being here!”**

Imagine their feelings, being rejected from church because of their skin-colour – probably at the same time that they were finding it difficult to get lodgings for the same reason! They could probably come to terms with the ignorant prejudices of landlords, but the church was a different matter! The result has been the formation and growth of ‘black’ churches – from which white and other ethnic groups are not excluded – which are still thriving, while many churches that didn’t want **‘different people’** in their congregations are struggling to survive, or have closed. Despite anti-discrimination laws, some people still find ways of excluding those who are different and will continue to do so unless they are either challenged directly, or unless we set an example of acceptance of all-comers in our daily lives. It is not always easy, but it is certainly what Jesus wants of us.

This story challenges us especially at this time, when our society seems more divided into **‘us and them’** than ever: leading political parties are still having to address claims of anti-semitism and islamophobia, while, in spite of recent appointments, the Anglican Church is still divided over women bishops and gay bishops. Lest Methodists feel smug, we just have problems with the idea of bishops in the first place! A month ago, the attack on children at a Taylor Swift dance class in Southport led to a frenzy of malicious disinformation on the Internet, blaming the attack on a Muslim asylum-seeker. The subsequent attacks on mosques and hotels that housed asylum-seekers were not only shameful, but displayed a worrying degree of prejudice among many fellow citizens. However, prejudice can manifest itself in many insidious forms – against LGBT groups, or the plump, bald, old, or disabled. I know we have anti-discrimination laws, but these usually only come into effect after somebody has suffered discrimination.

In his ministry, Jesus was open to all people: the ceremonially unclean; the despised, marginalised, sinful of society; Romans; Gentiles and even Samaritans. A few weeks ago, the Lectionary included the account of the Canaanite woman who pleaded with Jesus to cure her sick daughter. Christ replied provocatively, in terms that would probably have been branded ‘racist’ by our Media. **“Let us first feed the children. It isn’t right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”**, the traditional response she would have received from ordinary Jewish males. However, our translations are unhelpful, for Jesus was actually satirising the Jewish prejudice by using the word **‘kunarion’** meaning ‘puppies’ rather than **‘kuon’** or dogs. By softening the insult, Jesus invited the feisty mother to come back at him with, **“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s leftovers.”** Our Lord was so delighted by her reply that he acceded to her request and sent her on her way with a blessing.

Jesus did not treat the Canaanite woman as a member of a despised group of foreigners, but as an individual with a profound need to be helped. He cast off traditional attitudes, which his followers had expected him to observe, offering grace and mercy instead of bitter rejection. Here was the real life version of the parable of the Good Samaritan with Jesus, the Jew, showing compassion to the Gentile, rather than vice versa. No one, not even the robber crucified alongside him, or those who crucified him was outside the scope of Christ’s grace. The passage reminds us that God loves everyone, irrespective of colour, creed, gender, or customs, not just a chosen few. Jesus lived, was crucified and was raised for all people, not just the Jews. Therefore, we must avoid thinking ourselves superior to others, writing off people as ‘worthless’ or as ‘rejects’.

Many years ago, a monastery fell on hard times: nobody offered himself as a novice, so it looked as though the community would become extinct. The abbot visited the local bishop and discussed the situation with him. On his return to the monastery, the abbot was asked what the bishop had said. The abbot looked gravely at them and said, **“Remember, the Messiah is among you!”**

Gradually, the monks began to treat one another more carefully, just in case one of them was the Messiah and so a remarkable change occurred within the community. Outsiders began to visit the monastery once more, to worship and trade. Before long, new novices presented themselves, because they saw value, kingdom value, in what the community was working for. Old squabbles, power struggles, self-interest had been replaced by peace, reconciliation and mutual concern for one another’s well-being. **Let us learn to live with the thought that Christ is among us, so we may answer his call to serve all our neighbours, not just those we favour, or with whom we are comfortable, for unless we are inclusive, we will turn away our brothers and sisters, even though they want to serve our Saviour, too. Amen.**

*We shall close our worship with a hymn by Jacqui Jones, a South African Christian composer and singer, who now lives as a vicar’s wife in New Zealand. Hymn number 662, ‘Have you heard God’s voice; has your heart been stirred?’*

**1. Have you heard God’s voice; has your heart been stirred?**

**Are you still prepared to follow?**

**Have you made a choice to remain and serve,  
Though the way be rough and narrow? Chorus:**

*Will you walk the path that will cost you much  
And embrace the pain and sorrow?*

*Will you trust in One who entrusts to you  
The disciples of tomorrow?*

**2. Will you use your voice; will you not sit down  
When the multitudes are silent?**

**Will you make a choice to stand your ground  
When the crowds are turning violent? Chorus:**

**3. In your city streets will you be God’s heart?  
Will you listen to the voiceless?**

**Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start,  
Will you share your faith with the faithless? Chorus:**

**4. Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith  
And believe it could be different?**

**Will you share your views using words of grace?  
Will you leave a thoughtful imprint? Chorus:**

*We will walk the path that will cost us much  
And embrace the pain and sorrow.*

*We will trust in One who entrusts to us  
The disciples of tomorrow.*

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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.**