

**A service for 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2025. (StF)**

**Call to Worship: Psalm 71 verses 14 to 16**

But as for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more. My mouth will tell of your righteousness, of your salvation all day long, though I know not its measure. I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, O Sovereign LORD; I will proclaim your righteousness, yours alone. Amen.

*Our opening hymn was written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community and is set to a Gaelic melody from the Isle of Lewis. We sing the first three verses of number 28, 'Jesus calls us here to meet him'.*

**1. Jesus calls us here to meet him**

**As, through word and song and prayer,  
We affirm God's promised presence  
Where his people live and care.  
Praise the God who keeps his promise;  
Praise the Son who calls us friends;  
Praise the Spirit who, among us,  
To our hopes and fears attends.**

**2. Jesus calls us to confess him**

**Word of life and Lord of all,  
Sharer of our flesh and frailness,  
Saving all who fail or fall,  
Tell his holy human story;  
Tell his tales that all may hear;  
Tell the world that Christ in glory  
Came to earth to meet us here.**

**3, Jesus calls us to each other,**

**Vastly different though we are;  
Creed and colour, class and gender  
Neither limit nor debar.**

**Join the hand of friend and stranger;**

**Join the hands of age and youth;**

**Join the faithful and the doubter**

**In their common search for truth.      © John L. Bell (born 1949) & Graham Maule (1958 – 2020)**

***Let us pray***

Lord of life, how majestic is your name in all the universe! Your glory shines throughout the earth. When we look at the wonders of your creation, which you spoke into being, the beauty of earth, sea and sky, the vastness of space and consider the ecosystems that maintain life, we are astounded not only by the height, depth and breadth of your might and wisdom, but that you should care for feeble, sinful human beings. Yet you have given us stewardship over this planet and seek to draw us ever-closer as your earthly children.

When we resisted your holy will, you came to us as Christ Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection, not only revealed your true nature and showed us how you want us to live, but broke the hold of sin and death and offers us everlasting life. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! Amen.

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

Lord, we come to thank you for the many blessings we receive from you: all the good things we enjoy; opportunities and experiences that have blessed us and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most of all thank you for Christ Jesus, without whom we are helpless and hopeless, loveless and unlovable.

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

Amazing God, your love for us is everlasting and boundless and we know that we don't deserve it, for our lives fall short of what you would have them be. As we reflect upon our failings, we confess that we have not loved and served you wholeheartedly, nor have we cared for other people as we would want to be cared for by them. Lord, for the sins we have committed and for the good we have failed to do, forgive us in Jesus' name as we turn away from what we know is wrong.

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

Merciful, loving God, we believe that you hear and answer all our prayers, and that in your great goodness you have pardoned us. Teach us to serve you, so that, by helping and loving others faithfully and joyfully in Jesus' holy name we honour and glorify you for as long as we live. Amen.

***We shall say the prayer that Jesus taught 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.**

***Our second hymn first appeared in the appendix of ‘Hymns Ancient & Modern’ in 1868. The chairman of the hymnal’s compilers was Revd. Sir Henry Williams Baker, vicar of Monkland, near Leominster who wrote the hymn and became a baronet in 1859. Sir Henry’s last words were said to be the third verse of this hymn. We sing hymn number 479, ‘The King of love my Shepherd is’.***

**1. The King of love my shepherd is,  
Whose goodness faileth never;  
I nothing lack if I am his  
And he is mine for ever.**

**2. Where streams of living water flow,  
My ransomed soul he leadeth,  
And where the verdant pastures grow  
With food celestial feedeth.**

**3. Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,  
But yet in love he sought me,  
And on his shoulder gently laid,  
And home, rejoicing, brought me.**

**4. In death’s dark vale I fear no ill  
With thee, dear Lord, beside me;  
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,**

**Thy cross before to guide me.**

**5. Thou spread'st a table in my sight;  
Thy unction grace bestoweth;  
And O what transport of delight  
From thy pure chalice floweth!**

**6. And so through all the length of days  
Thy goodness faileth never:  
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise  
Within thy house for ever.**

© *Henry Williams Baker {1821 – 1877}*

***We come now to our prayers of intercession for neighbours near and far. Let us pray.***

Sovereign God, you bless us with your love, so, we turn to you, asking you to help us to act as your earthly hands by helping neighbours who are in need or any kind of trouble. Although our own powers are limited and at times the brokenness of our world threatens to overwhelm us, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with power and influence who can heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Lord, we are aware of the brokenness of this beautiful, yet fragile world and so we ask you help us to play what part we can, however small, to build a better world by seeking justice for all, by campaigning to end poverty here and abroad, by sharing the earth's resources instead of fighting over them and by learning to co-operate with one another, accepting and even celebrating our differences, rather than being divided by them.

Lord, this week we have commemorated the eightieth anniversary liberation of Auschwitz which revealed the horrors of the Holocaust in which more than six million people were murdered, mainly Jews but also gypsies, handicapped, Jehovah's Witnesses and other people whose beliefs, politics, lifestyles and gender led them to Nazi concentration camps. We have not learned, for there have been acts of genocide since in Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, besides the terrible loss of life in the Gaza conflict, whether or not that constitutes a genocide. We continue to grieve about the war in Ukraine and civil conflicts in Sudan and Somalia. Teach us to recognize our common humanity and your love for all. Guide the leaders of the nations to govern with compassion and justice, to learn to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, so that peace is established on earth. May we mirror what we ask by learning to live harmoniously with our neighbours.

In the name of Jesus, the Lord of wholeness and wellbeing, hear our prayer for people in our community who are ill in body, mind or spirit, 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 grant them healing, courage, comfort, hope and transcending peace.

Holy God, we pray for our church, churches in our district 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.

Creator God, the wildfires in California, arctic conditions in central and eastern states of the USA, super-storms in Ireland, Scotland and parts of Europe provide clear evidence of global warming, with super-storms, floods and wildfires occurring elsewhere, too. May we play our part in reducing the harm we are doing the planet, by polluting less, recycling more and using only the earth's resources we actually need. Help us pass on a healthier world to forthcoming generations by making our own sacrifices for their sakes.

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.

*Early Methodists believed that souls could be won, not only by earnest entreaties in sermons, but by teaching the Christian faith through hymns which the masses could pick up easily. There was a need to find melodies which were appealing, so the hymn writers' words were adapted to fit 'popular' tunes of the day. "Love Divine" is no exception, for Charles Wesley wrote it round a song from John Dryden's 1691 opera, "King Arthur", the music of which was provided by Henry Purcell. The original piece ran, 'Fairest Isle, all isles excelling....', but Charles Wesley wrote a hymn that ranges between a prayer for Christ to make us a 'new creation' and a song of adoration for the God of love, who is agape – 'Pure, unbounded love'. We continue our worship as we sing hymn number 503, 'Love divine, all loves excelling,'*

**1. Love divine, all loves excelling,  
Joy of heaven to earth come down,  
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,  
All thy faithful mercies crown.  
Jesus, thou art all compassion,  
Pure, unbounded love thou art;  
Visit us with thy salvation,  
Enter every trembling heart.**

**2. Come, almighty to deliver,  
Let us all thy life receive;  
Suddenly return, and never,  
Never more thy temples leave.  
Thee we would be always blessing,  
Serve thee as thy hosts above,  
Pray, and praise thee without ceasing,  
Glory in thy perfect love.**

**3. Finish then thy new creation,  
Pure and spotless let us be;  
Let us see thy great salvation  
Perfectly restored in thee:  
Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,**

**Till we cast our crowns before thee,  
Lost in wonder, love and praise!**

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

**Our reading is Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians chapter 13**

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. Amen.

*Thomas Colvin, who trained as a missionary at Handsworth Theological College, wrote our next hymn during a day training course for evangelists at Chereponi, Ghana in the mid-1960s. I wonder if he was bored by the course, or inspired by it. He set his words to a Ghanaian love song. Hymn number 249, 'Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love,'*

*Jesu, Jesu*

*Fill us with your love,*

*Show us how to serve*

*The neighbours we have from you.*

**1. Kneels at the feet of his friends,**

**Silently washes their feet,**

**Master who acts as a slave to them: *Chorus***

**2. Neighbours are rich folk and poor,**

**Neighbours are black folk and white,**

**Neighbours are nearby and far away: *Chorus***

**3. These are the ones we should serve,**

**These are the ones we should love.**

**All these are neighbours to us and you: *Chorus***

**4. Kneel at the feet of our friends,**

**Silently washing their feet,**

**This is the way we should live with you: *Chorus***

© T.S. Colvin {born 1925}

**Sermon:** "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." 1 Cor. 13:13  
Although the thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the churches in Corinth is a hymn to love and is often used at weddings, including my son's, it was originally a rebuke to a

dysfunctional group of early Christians, who were engaged in a power game. One of the problems that faced the troubled Church at Corinth was the desire of many members to be exalted above the others and such exclusivity was threatening to tear the community apart. The Corinthian Church had an extremely mixed congregation: slaves and freed men; wealthy, influential merchant women; Jews and Gentiles. Their differences in social standing, wealth and racial background led to enormous quarrels. Arguments raged over the manner of worship: who was the best preacher, {Paul, Apollos, or Peter}, whether or not to observe Hebrew customs and festivals, the rules for sexual behaviour and the role of women in the church. Even the eucharist was a shambles: they brought their own food and drink, but did not share it, so the wealthy ate themselves sick and became inebriated whilst the slaves stood by hungry and parched.

A major power struggle developed over the relative importance of gifts of the Holy Spirit: apostleship; prophecy; teaching; working miracles; gifts of healing; helpers; administrators and the ability to speak in tongues. Paul told the Corinthians these gifts were granted to build up the community, not to make individuals more important than their neighbours. He continued his argument to the heart of what is required in being a Christian: to set love at the centre of our life.

Paul wrote that, whatever gifts the Spirit has granted us, if we do not use them because we love as Jesus loved, freely and humbly, our gifts will be worthless. Even acts of charity, or self-sacrifice are of no use, if they are not motivated by love. Paul wrote about the qualities of real love: **'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.'** We can see this kind of love in action in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life.

A better translation of **'patient'** is **'long-suffering'**; consider how Jesus bore the agony of the cross, the desertion of his disciples and the taunts of the priests and scribes. He did not curse them, but instead asked his Father's forgiveness for them. **'Kind'** refers to **'hesed'**, loving-kindness; think of the people Christ reached out to and restored, tax collectors, Gentiles, prostitutes, lepers, the mentally and spiritually disturbed, all considered 'beyond the pale' by orthodox Jews. Despite his powers, Jesus refused to turn stones into bread even when he was tormented by hunger, nor did he seek luxury. Instead, he relied on what he was given by hosts and supporters. He did not exalt himself, but, at the Last Supper, it was he, the Master, who washed his disciples' feet, acting like the humblest servant. He displayed neither anger nor discourtesy when he was betrayed and brought before Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate. He persevered through the worst man can do to his fellow man and trusted God the Father enough to endure crucifixion for wretched sinners like us, confident that he would be raised on the third day. Jesus is the personification of **agape**, the boundless love of God. As followers, we are challenged to display his love in our lives, to foreigners, asylum-seekers, or to people we find it hard to like. Here is an example of such love: Maximillian Kolbe, a Roman Catholic priest was serving in Poland when that country was invaded and quickly overrun by Nazi Germany in 1939. However, when Nazis began to round up Jews to send them to concentration camps, Father Maximillian tried to shelter as many as he could. Needless to say, he was betrayed, arrested, then sent to the fearsome Auschwitz Concentration Camp.

Father Maximillian was not cowed by his experiences. Instead, he set about tending the sick, taking communion services, comforting the dying of all creeds and even sharing the small allowance of food he received with the starving. Above all else, he remained a cheerful presence, showing that God's love reached even into the most hellish of places and to those who might have thought themselves abandoned and forgotten. Even some of the concentration camp guards were amazed at his smiling face and grace, but his greatest challenge occurred in July 1941, when three prisoners escaped from the camp.

As a result, the Nazi guards lined up the male prisoners and selected ten to be starved to death in an underground bunker. One of those selected to die, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out in despair, 'Oh, my poor wife! My poor children! I shall never see them again!' At once, prisoner 16670, Maximillian Kolbe, stepped forward from the ranks of prisoners and offered himself in his place. The guards wanted ten victims, so it was of no consequence who was taken into the death bunker and they agreed to the swap. The ten were led to the bunker and sealed inside with no food, water, nor light.

A fortnight later, Nazi guards opened the bunker, and were amazed to find Father Kolbe still alive, though unable to stand, or speak. Rather than spare him, they gave him a lethal injection of carbolic acid. Even then, he offered no resistance and smiled at them as they finished him off. Mr. Gajowniczek died peacefully in 1999, an old man saved by an incredible priest. Pope John Paul II recognised his fellow-countryman, Maximillian Kolbe and fast-tracked him towards sainthood. In John chapter 15 verse 3, Jesus declared, **'Greater love has no man than this, that a man gives up his life for his friends.'** Love is the Spirit's greatest gift!

Members of the Corinthian church reasoned, **'we're special; we're God's chosen people!'** They failed to understand that, to God, all people are special and his elect, if they turn to him. God loves us equally, irrespective of our station in life, or our gifts and graces and he calls us to love one another without discrimination. ***May love be our watchword and our guide in life, so that all we do and say reflects the wonderful love of our Saviour to our neighbours, so they may share in the Good News and well-being that Jesus came to bring us. Amen.***

***Our next hymn was published posthumously in 1946, seven years after the death of Rt. Revd. Timothy Rees, Bishop of Llandaff. Bishop Timothy had served as a Chaplain to the forces during the Great War and was awarded the Military Cross. After the War, he pursued a monastic vocation at the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield in Yorkshire and was there, in 1922, when he wrote this hymn. After he became Bishop of Llandaff in 1931, he devoted most of his time and energy supporting the unemployed of South Wales and their families during the Depression. We shall end our worship as we sing hymn number 103, 'God is Love: let heaven adore him;'***

**1. God is Love: let heaven adore him;  
God is Love: let earth rejoice;  
Let creation sing before him,  
And exalt him with one voice.  
He who laid the earth's foundation,  
He who spread the heavens above,  
He who breathes through all creation,**

**He is Love, eternal Love.**

**2. God is Love: and he enfoldeth  
All the world in one embrace;  
With unfailing grasp he holdeth  
Every child of every race.  
And when human hearts are breaking  
Under sorrow's iron rod,  
Then they find that selfsame aching  
Deep within the heart of God.**

**3. God is Love: and though with blindness  
Sin afflicts the souls of men,  
God's eternal loving-kindness  
Holds and guides them even then.  
Sin and death and hell shall never  
O'er us final triumph gain;  
God is Love: so Love for ever  
O'er the universe must reign.**

© *Timothy Rees (1874 – 1939)*

***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.**