

**A service for 6<sup>th</sup> October, 2024 (StF)**

**Call to Worship: Psalm 26 verses 8 to 10**

Good and upright is the LORD; therefore, he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant. Amen.

*Our opening hymn, a paraphrase of Psalm 100, was written by William Kethe, a Sixteenth Century Protestant who was exiled in Frankfurt after fleeing persecution by Queen Mary Tudor, usually remembered as Bloody Queen Mary. In 1557 he moved to Geneva, becoming an envoy to congregations of exiled English Protestants throughout Europe. He spent some of his time at Geneva aiming 'to finish the Bible and the Psalms both in metre and in prose', before he returned to England after Queen Mary died, became an army chaplain and, later, he was made Rector at Childe Okeford in Dorset, from 1561 until his death somewhere around 1594. We shall sing hymn number 1, 'All people that on earth do dwell,'*

**1. All people that on earth do dwell,  
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;  
Him serve with mirth, His praise forth tell;  
Come ye before Him and rejoice.**

**2. The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;  
Without our aid He did us make;  
We are His folk, He doth us feed;  
And for His flock He doth us take.**

**3. O enter then His gates with praise,  
Approach with joy His courts unto;  
Praise, laud, and bless His name always,  
For it is seemly so to do.**

**4. For why? The Lord our God is good;  
His mercy is for ever sure;  
His truth at all times firmly stood,  
And shall from age to age endure.**

© William Kethe (obit 1594)

**Let us pray.**

God of Creation, whose Word brought life to our universe, whose love maintains life and through whose grace we may call you Abba, Father, we are here to worship and adore your holy Name. Amazingly, when we turned away from you, instead of condemning 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. Take away any anxiety or distraction that prevents us dwelling upon your holiness and beauty and help us to sing your praises joyfully, to pray to you in faith and to receive and understand your message today.

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 loving us even when we stray from you, for times when we are loveless and unlovable. Forgive us when we fail to answer your call, whether or not because we are too busy, or self-absorbed, fearful or plain obstinate. We don't always love our neighbours as ourselves and we are sometimes lukewarm in our discipleship.

Therefore, we come to ask for both forgiveness and grace to change our ways for the better.

Faithful God, we believe you hear our prayers and have restored us to righteousness. Help us to both accept your love and to work with you to build up your Kingdom, in response to your steadfast mercy. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. 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.**

***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 455, 'Christ is the world's light, Christ and none other'.***

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

**No one can serve him and despise his brother.**

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

**Glory to God on high.**

**3. Christ is the world's Life, he 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 Man, my Brother:**

**Glory to God on high.**

© Fred Pratt Green {1903 – 2000}

***We come to our prayers 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 the 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 justice and mercy are present will real peace prevail. We pay for peace in the world, especially for a just and swift end to fighting between Israel, Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah, between Ukraine and Russia, besides Sudan and Somalia where conflicts are often unreported by our Media, yet where their populations are threatened with 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 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, 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 before it is too late, so that future generations will have a habitable world in which to live.

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.

**The Old Testament reading is Genesis chapter 2 verses 18 to 24**

The LORD God said,

"It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.

So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man." For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. Amen.

**Our gospel reading is Mark chapter 10 verses 2 to 16**

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking,

"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

"What did Moses command you?" he replied. They said,

"Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied.

"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female'. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate."

When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered,  
"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them. Amen.

*Our penultimate hymn was published posthumously in 1946, seven years after the death of R.t 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, that he wrote this hymn When in 1931 he became Bishop of Llandaff he devoted most of his time and energy supporting the unemployed of South Wales and their families during the Depression. We shall sing hymn number 36, '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)

**Sermon: "What God has joined together, let man not separate." Mark 10:9**

The Creation stories in Genesis are early attempts to explain how life came into being and humankind's relationship with the Lord, the planet and with one another. It is not intended to be literal, nor scientific, but rather a poetic picture of God's work and

purpose: he declared that what he'd made was good and he delighted in it. The account of Eve being made from one of Adam's ribs is never to go down well with women, liberated or not, but its intention is to show God's aim was for us to be united in loving relationships, to ease loneliness. That was the intention, but too often human relationships are far from what God wants.

Our gospel reading deals with the thorny question of divorce. This passage has caused great difficulties for Christians who have been divorced and whose relationships with the church have become strained, even if they were classed as the 'innocent' party, because Jesus appears to prohibit the practice. In fact, the passage needs to be put into context before any such conclusion is drawn.

Jesus was responding to a loaded question from Pharisees, who wanted him to compromise himself. At that time there were two rival schools of thought among the Jews, one of Rabbi **SHAMMAI**, and the other of Rabbi **HILLEL**. Supporters of Shammai maintained that a man could not legally divorce his wife, except for sexual unfaithfulness, whereas Hillel taught that a man might divorce his wife for many other – often trivial – reasons, including for cooking a bad meal, or if he was attracted to another woman who pleased him better. (*Sorry ladies, the converse did not apply!*) Had Jesus taken the side of either of the rabbis, he would have made himself unpopular with many Jews, so he responded by asking them what Moses' taught about divorce in the Torah.

When the Pharisees replied that Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and send his wife away, Jesus seized upon the word '**allowed**', for it was not a command but a concession to the hard-heartedness of some men, for whom real commitment was lacking. Essentially, it was a compromise between easy divorce, or open adultery, so Jesus moved to Genesis, the first part of the Law, pointing out that God's original intention was for marriage to be the closest possible bond between two human beings, closer even than parental affection, certainly not something to be dissolved for expediency's sake.

When Jesus told his disciples, '**Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery,**' it appears at first glance that he condemns the remarriage of a divorcee – and certainly this view was held by many in the church until recently. **However, the words suggest that the remarriage follows hard on the heels of the divorce and that the divorcee was already in a relationship with his / her new partner beforehand.** In other words, such a divorce was a wilful circumventing of God's intention for marriage and since there was no valid reason for the marriage to end, the remarriage was an adulterous sham.

Both readings refer to covenant relationships, the first between human beings and God, the second between two people. Covenant is often seen as an agreement, or a contract, but the Hebrew word, **berith**, means to shackle or chain together, implying a much stronger bond – a real commitment. A recent report said that one marriage in three in the UK ends in divorce, often resulting in hardship and heartbreak, especially if children are involved. Common wisdom tells us to steer clear if anybody's marriage is heading for the rocks, but perhaps we should offer our support in a quiet way, not by interfering, nor taking sides, but by encouraging the couple to try counselling to see whether or not their marriage can be saved and being there to support them if it cannot. An opportunity to talk – or pray together – may open up channels of communication that a troubled relationship may have closed down. Whatever happens, we should not

ostracize people if their marriages fail, for only the shallowest don't suffer in those circumstances.

What of our covenant with God? We are bound to him by faith in Christ Jesus, through whom the Father's glory and grace is revealed. In Jesus we see God with arms open wide to embrace us, to draw us close to him with bonds not of steel chain but of love. God loves us despite our failures and sins, so much so that Christ opened his arms wide at Calvary to die in order that our sins may be forgiven, for God's faithful love knows no bounds. God's love for us is free and unconditional; he calls us to love him and one another in return.

These readings challenge our attitudes to God and one another. Is our love for God and each other conditional? Was Satan right in the Book of Job when he implied that we are only fair-weather friends and will turn against the Lord when misfortune strikes? Jesus remained faithful to his Father throughout his passion and crucifixion. Even his cry, '**Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?**' was not a cry of despair, but his expression of Psalm 22 in which the suffering servant was vindicated and restored. Do we only love neighbours who look like us, act like us, or share our views, or are we like Christ Jesus who reached out to the marginalised, to outcasts, to Gentiles and cared for them without asking for anything in return? Are we like the sanctimonious crowd who brought a woman caught in adultery to our Lord, expecting him to condemn her, or do we recognize our own need for grace and offer support and friendship to people whose lives are broken, whether through misfortune, or their own foolishness? **Loving Lord, help us to bind ourselves to you and to one another with the covenant love of Christ our Saviour. Amen.**

*We close our worship with a hymn by Rev. John Bode, who was Rector at Castle Camps, Cambridge. His daughter and two sons attended confirmation classes, so that they could make their vows together in 1866. The poetic Rector decided that such a special occasion deserved a special hymn which is not only a dedication of oneself to Christ, but recognises that the path of discipleship is not an easy one. It is an appeal to Jesus to guide us through life. Hymn number 704, 'O Jesus, I have promised'.*

**1. O Jesus, I have promised  
To serve you to the end;  
Lord, be for ever near me,  
My Master and my Friend:  
I shall not fear the battle  
If you are by my side,  
Nor wander from the pathway  
If you will be my Guide.**

**2. O let me feel you near me:  
The world is ever near;  
I see the sights that dazzle,  
The tempting sounds I hear;  
My foes are ever near me,  
Around me and within;  
But, Jesus, now draw nearer,  
And shield my soul from sin.**

**3. O let me hear you speaking  
In accents clear and still,  
Above the storms of passion,  
The murmurs of self-will;  
O speak to reassure me,  
To hasten or control;  
Lord, speak and make me listen,  
O guardian of my soul.**

**4. O Jesus, you have promised  
To all who follow you,  
That where you are in glory  
Your servant shall be, too;  
And Jesus, I have promised  
To serve you to the end;  
O give me grace to follow  
My Master and my Friend!**

© *J.E. Bode {1816 – 1874}*

***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.