

Sunday 27th September 2020

Order of Service

Gathering hymn: StF 82 O Lord my God

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the works Thy Hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder, thy pow'r throughout the universe
displayed,

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!*

And when I think that God his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in.
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin,
Then sings my soul.....

When Christ shall come, with shouts of acclamation, and take me home, what joy shall
fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration and there proclaim, "My God, how great Thou art!"
Then sings my soul.....

Stuart K. Hine (1899-1989)

Opening words

God of the unexpected, to be found in unexpected people and in unexpected places,
open our eyes to see you.

God of the unexpected, awake in us a holy curiosity and expectation to find you in the
places where we seek you and in the places where we have given up looking.

God of the unexpected, meet us in our worship today, so that wherever you may be, we
may be also, willing to watch and wait, walk, run and dance to the tune of your call on
our lives.

StF 247 I danced in the morning

I danced in the morning when the world was begun, and I danced in the moon, and the
stars and the sun,
and I came down from heaven, and I danced on the earth, at Bethlehem I had my birth.

*Dance, then, wherever you may be, I am the Lord of the Dance, said he,
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the Dance, said
he.*

I danced for the scribe and the pharisee, but they would not dance and they wouldn't
follow me.

I danced for the fishermen, for James and John, they came with me and the Dance went on.

Dance, then, wherever you may be.....

I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame; the holy people said it was a shame. They whipped and they stripped and they hung me on high, and they left me there on a Cross to die.

Dance, then, wherever you may be.....

I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black, it's hard to dance with the devil on your back.

They buried my body and they thought I'd gone, but I am the Dance and I still go on.

Dance, then, wherever you may be

They cut me down and I leapt up high; I am the life that'll never, never die;

I'll live in you if you'll live in me - I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.

Dance, then, wherever you may be

Sydney Carter (1915 - 2004)

Opening prayers

Father God, be the oneness that exists between us, the focus of our lives and worship, our unity of faith.

Precious Jesus, be the peace that is shared between us, the compassion we show to others, our unity of love.

Holy Spirit, kindle the flame that burns within us, the light that will shine in the darkness, our unity of hope.

You call us to unity, to be of one mind with our brothers and sisters in Christ, yet sometimes we struggle with relationships.

Forgive us, Lord.

Grant us the grace to love those whom we find challenging and the wisdom to know when it is our turn to say sorry.

Your love does not fade even as we choose a different path and are persuaded to put faith aside. Your love is constant and accepting. Your love is merciful and forgiving.

Your love is grace-full and inspiring. Your love is all we are not and everything you are, and we thank you, our loving God and King. Amen.

Bible reading: Exodus 17: 1-7 Water from the Rock

17 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

All age talk

In our Old Testament reading from Exodus we find the Israelites, under the leadership of Moses, in a testing and difficult situation. Once again, the complaining, quarrelling people of God - amidst thirst and difficulty - experience God's presence and provision for them from a very unexpected place and source. It strikes me that if water is going to come from anywhere then the least expected place would be a lump of stone! The Israelites on their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land were getting used to God providing for them in unlikely ways. Today's encounter is no exception. God provides for the Israelites when and where they least expect it.

I want to share with you two true stories that I have come across this week. The first was told to me by someone who has a friend who, unfortunately, has money worries at the present time. Their bank account was running very low and with no payday in sight they were very concerned about how they were going to be able to afford shopping for food. With very little money available to them they went to the supermarket to do the minimum amount of shopping possible. Having filled their basket with a few essential items they went to join the queue at the checkout. Their goods were put through the cash till and the amount that needed to be paid came up on the card machine. They went to pay and just before they could put their card over the reader, a man behind them in the queue came forward and offered to pay for the shopping. Before they had chance to respond to the offer, the shopping had been paid for and the man went off and on his way without waiting for any thanks or words of appreciation. What an unexpected random act of kindness. What a blessing to the person who was struggling to afford basic food and household items!

The second story comes from twitter. Some of you may know that I follow a few folk on twitter who work in the medical profession. One of the people who I follow is a consultant anaesthetist who has been working hard during the pandemic. A few months ago she tweeted about a particularly difficult shift where she had been involved in

transferring different patients across London who had all been suffering from Covid-19. Before the transfer of one such patient she tweeted this: 'the nurse caring for the patient we were transferring asked whether she could pray for us. In that moment she asked for us to be protected, to stay safe and be able to care for our patients and thanked us for what we were doing. I blinked back tears, I'm not at all religious, but in that moment surrounded by so much awfulness it was something so beautiful'. Another unexpected moment of God's presence being made known in the middle of a difficult situation and what a blessing it was to those involved!

I wonder where we encounter God in the world today? One of the stark reminders that lockdown has given us is that God is not confined to our buildings and our routinized way of doing things (if we ever thought God was!). God is bigger and greater than all of this and the challenge for us, just as it was for the Israelites, is to journey with the God who goes before us wherever we are and whatever we experience trusting that God is among us and able to provide for us.

Where might we meet God in this coming week?

Where might we be a channel of God's presence to another person or group of people?

StF 254 Seek ye first

Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness
And all these things shall be added unto you, Allelu, Alleluia

Al - le - lu - ia, Al - le - lu - ia, Al - le - lu - ia, Al - le - lu, Al - le - lu - ia.

Men shall not live by bread alone but by every word
that proceedeth from the mouth of God, Allelu, Alleluia

Al - le - lu - ia, Al - le - lu - ia, Al - le - lu - ia, Al - le - lu, Al - le - lu - ia.

Ask and it shall be given unto you, seek and ye shall find.
Knock and the door shall be opened unto you, Allelu, Alleluia.

Al - le - lu - ia, Al - le - lu - ia. Al - le - lu - ia, Al - le - lu Al - le - lu - ia

Karen Lafferty (b.1948)

Bible reading: Matthew 21: 23-32 The Authority of Jesus Questioned

²³ When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴ Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for

all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

The Parable of the Two Sons

²⁸ "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹ He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Sermon

Our New Testament gospel reading deals with expectations of a different kind. What authority does Jesus expect to have? Who has given him the authority to say and do such things? Then, with the little story that Jesus tells, we are invited to think about who is expected to believe and what expectations are placed on us if we say that we do?

The context for our reading in Matthew's gospel is that we are in Holy Week, the last few days of Jesus' earthly life. Jesus has entered Jerusalem and already ruffled a few feathers. Most notably he has cleansed the temple, overturning tables and chairs and creating quite a scene as he condemned the practices that were happening in a house of prayer. The religious establishment is furious with him. And so they ask him about where he gets his authority from. Jesus answers with another question and then a story to illustrate his point. Jesus confounds all the expectations of the religious establishment and challenges all the assumptions that they may have had about the Messiah and the Kingdom of God. In the short parable that Jesus tells we are invited to think about two different responses to the message that firstly John the Baptist and then Jesus brings. The first son in the story, says the right thing but then does the opposite. The second son, doesn't respond straightaway with the right words but then, having thought about it, goes and does the right thing.

Jesus concludes the story with a punchline that further incenses his accusers. *You*, Jesus tells the chief priests and elders, are like the second son in the story. You talk the talk, you make lofty promises, you say all the right things but when John the Baptist came and offered you the good news of the kingdom, you refused to act. Meanwhile, the people whom you deem the worst sinners? The tax collectors and the prostitutes, they are like the first son in the story. When John offered *them* the gift of repentance and salvation, they responded — even though their lives until then had not been particularly pious. Recognising their own helplessness and hopelessness they flocked to the wilderness in obedience to God, and repented. *And yet even then* — even when you saw countless others embracing the Gospel, you refused to change your

minds. And so the prostitutes and tax collectors, the people who might be considered to be at the bottom of the pile, the people least expected to respond, they will enter God's kingdom ahead of you.

What Jesus opposed through the story of the father and the two sons was religion that stops at empty words. All forms of devotion that don't move us into the world of concrete action on behalf of justice, mercy, equality, love, and compassion are to be rejected. All forms of Christianity that flicker to life on Sundays, but then fade out between Monday and Saturday are worthless. We are expected to be people of our word, of integrity, to go and live out what we proclaim in our worship.

We are invited to be like the first son. We are invited to be like the tax collectors and the prostitutes. We are expected to be people who are not full of empty words but loving actions. People who know our great need of God and humbly come asking God to change our lives for our own good and the good of others. This is challenging stuff! No wonder so many who thought they had religion all sorted found it so difficult to hear. It just wasn't what they expected! And those who expected the Messiah to pass them by on the way to the temple, they realised that actually this God was for them and could fill the gap in their lives that they yearned to be filled.

Our God is, in many ways, a God of the unexpected. Where might we encounter the surprising nature of his presence in this coming week? I'll leave you with that thought!

Prayers of Intercession

Holy and loving God, just as you have called us to know you, you have called us to love you.

Lord God, sustain us by your love and make us worthy of your calling.

We pray for the church as it works in poor and difficult areas in our world.

Lord God, by your love, lead us and transform us.

We pray for all the kingdoms of the world that they may become the kingdom of our God. We pray that the leaders of people and rulers may govern with humility that they may seek to truly serve and meet the needs of their people.

We pray for all who are exploited, for those who have been treated like slaves and for all who yearn for freedom and justice.

Lord, by your love, lead us and transform us.

As we have richly received, may we richly give. Teach us to be accepting and hospitable.

Lord God, by your love, lead us and transform us.

Lord, bless all who find life difficult at this time. We pray for those who have difficult decisions to make this week, we remember those who are having a hard time at work or at home. We pray for all who are brought low by sickness of any kind.

Pause to offer own prayers....

Lord God, by your love, lead us and transform us. All for Jesus' sake Amen.

Lord's Prayer

StF 545 Be thou my vision

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; naught be all else to me, save that thou art -
Thou my best thought, by day or by night; waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word; I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord.
Thou my great Father; and I thy true son, thou in me dwelling and I one with thee.

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise; thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Thou and thou only first in my heart, high King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; naught be all else to me, save that thou art -
Thou my best thought, by day or by night; waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

High King of heaven, my victory won, may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall, still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Eleanor Hull/Audrey Assad

Offertory prayer

Lord God, accept all that we have and are, bless our gifts of time, treasure and talents
in your service, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Closing words

May we go now from this time of worship, ready to meet God who is beyond this
moment.

May we seek God and be the presence of God in the world today.

Blessing

And now may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us and all those
who we know and love and are called to love, now and forever more. Amen.

StF 661 Give me the faith

Give me the faith which can remove and sink a mountain to a plain;
Give me the childlike praying love, which longs to build Thy love again;
Thy love, let it my heart empower, and all my simple soul devour.

I would the precious time redeem, and longer live for this alone:
to spend and to be spent for them who have not yet my Saviour known;
Fully on these my mission prove, and only breathe, to breathe Thy love.

My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord, into Thy blessed hands receive;
and let me live to preach Thy Word, and let me to Thy glory live;
my every sacred moment spend in publishing the sinner's friend.

Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart with boundless charity divine,
so shall I all my strength exert, and love them with a zeal like Thine,
And lead them to Thy open side, the sheep for whom the Shepherd died.

Charles Wesley (1707 - 1788)