

## Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> September – Order of Service

Led by Sarah Brooks, Linda Press and Nigel Cox

**Gathering Hymn:** StF 24 Come now is the time to worship

Come, now is the time to worship, Come, now is the time to give your heart  
Come, just as you are to worship, Come, just as you are before your God, Come

One day every tongue will confess You are God One day every knee will bow  
Still the greatest treasure remains for those Who gladly choose you now.

Come, now is the time to worship, Come, now is the time to give your heart  
Come, just as you are to worship, Come, just as you are before your God. Come

One day every tongue will confess You are God  
One day every knee will bow  
Still the greatest treasure remains for those,  
Who gladly choose you now

(Repeat)

Come, now is the time to worship, Come, now is the time to give your heart  
Come, just as you are to worship, Oh, come, just as you are before your God. Come

Songwriters: Brian Robert Doerksen

### Call to worship

Lord of all life,  
We open ourselves to meet with you,  
Come amongst us, Holy God, by your grace,  
May we find a sacred space to meet with you.  
Amen

**Hymn:** StF 28 Jesus calls us here to meet him

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.

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.

Jesus calls us to each other: Vastly different though we are  
Creed and colour, class, and gender Neither limit not 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 (*b:1949*) and Graham Maule (*b: 1958*)

### Opening Prayers

Lord of light,  
God who brings us together,  
Spirit of the divine, who guided the Israelites as a pillar of fire,  
We gather around the fire-pit today – to pray, to be open, to encounter you, Holy God.  
Here we are Lord, come amongst us, like fire.

We take a moment to offer you our thanks and praise.

You are a holy and awesome God. A God who, somehow, is with us and present in this very moment.

We give you thanks, for all that we have received. For the many blessings that we take for granted or miss the opportunity to notice.

Join us at the fireside, Lord God, and create a space for us to share our stories, to learn, to grow, to encounter you.

Here we are Lord, come amongst us, like fire.

Fill us with your Spirit, your Spirit that descends as a flame.

Fill us with the energy, inspiration and grace we need to go out into the world and bring about change, bring about love, bring about hope.

Here we are Lord, come amongst us, like fire.

Amen.

## Lord's Prayer

### Reading: Exodus 14: 19 – 31 Crossing the Sea

Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving.

And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the Lord swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen - the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

## Talk 1

Across the centuries, people have gathered around fires to talk, to cook, to reflect, to tell stories and to pray.

Do you have a favourite story? Perhaps a book you have read over-and-over again?

Perhaps a film or TV show that you turn to for a bit of comfort or inspiration? Perhaps a real-life event that happened to you or a friend which you find comfort in re-telling?

We have been watching a lot of the old Bond movies and Death in Paradise episodes!

I suspect that many of us have done more reading in the last few months, especially in the first few weeks of lockdown; I remember Claire saying in one of her letters, that she had pulled some books off the bookshelf to read.

If you were gathering around the fire-side, or fire-pit with some friends, – what story might you tell? Of course, in modern houses there often isn't a fire, certainly not a real one. When my daughter was about 7 or 8, I happened to say something about a fireplace and she asked, "What's a fireplace Mummy?" Fortunately, shortly after that we went to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, and going into one of the houses we were able to show her.

There is something about a fire-side that makes it easier for us to tell stories. Perhaps we might share a story we would normally be embarrassed about, or ask a question that might seem awkward in a more formal setting.

Today, and in these challenging times, as we try to make sense of what Coronavirus means for us and our churches, and the fact that our worship may be different for some time, how can we create a church community where we can feel equally able to share our stories. Can we help each other feel safe, and create spaces where we can be open and honest with each other, as we might be if we gathered around the fire-pit?

As we imagine ourselves sitting at the fireside, the place of story-telling, of prayer, cooking and shared reflection, can we build again our sense of human connection? People have sat around fires and told stories for as long as human beings have had stories to tell, and today we join in with that ancient tradition in listening to the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. In this time that has been so isolating for so many people, we need to find ways to connect again. And the best way to do that is through honest story-telling, and being open with each other.

What story are you going to tell around the fire this morning?

The Exodus story of crossing the Dead Sea was probably told round a fire for many generations, and in Jewish households, the Passover meal includes the retelling of the Israelites' liberation from the Egyptians. It is the long, twisted and turning journey of the people of Israel escaping slavery in Egypt and making their way across the desert to the 'Promised Land'. A journey that should have taken a matter of weeks, but ends up taking them forty years wandering in the wilderness.

Perhaps we have our own experiences of wilderness, and maybe we've discovered some of those during the last few months of lockdown? Perhaps Coronavirus has been a kind of wilderness for us, as we have wandered around aimlessly, hoping to find a way through all this.

This period of the Old Testament is the Israelites wilderness time. And yet, in the midst of their wilderness experience, the Israelites also come to know and understand their God, perhaps better than ever, and come to learn something of the lengths God will go to protect them.

**Hymn:** StF 465 Guide me O thou great Jehovah

Guide me o thou great redeemer, Pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak but thou art mighty; Hold me with thy powerful hand:  
Bread of heaven, Feed me now and evermore

Open now the crystal fountain Whence the healing streams do flow;  
Let the fiery cloudy pillar Lead me all my journey through:  
Strong deliverer, Be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan Bid my anxious fears subside;  
Death of death and hells destruction, Land me safe on Canaan's side:  
Songs of praises, songs of praises, I will ever give to thee

O am aros, O am aros (O for waiting, O for waiting)  
Yn ei gariad ddyddiau f'oes (In his love of days)

Songwriters: Adam Langston

**Reading:** Matthew 18: 21 – 35 Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

## Talk 2

The Exodus narrative is one of transformation: transformation from slavery to freedom. It is a story of God's unending love and care for his people throughout all their twists and turns and vagrancies.

Our Gospel reading speaks to us about the implications in our living for being people freed and forgiven by God. Peter's question to Jesus suggests he has some understanding of the nature of forgiveness. Normal Rabbinical practice would be that forgiveness for a repeated offense be extended not more than three times. By suggesting that forgiveness be offered on seven occasions Peter was clearly thinking he was being generous and merciful. Some have suggested that by offering to forgive seven times, Peter was doubling the norm and adding one so as to be seen to super generous. Others have suggested that as seven was a holy number to the Jewish people symbolizing perfection or completion that Peter was offering to forgive for infinity. Whichever theory you follow does not deflect from the fact that Peter was approaching the matter from a process of calculation. Much of Jewish life was constrained by detailed rules and regulations and I sense this in Peter's approach. It is almost formulaic.

Jesus's initial response does not challenge Peter's perception of forgiveness as he says to Peter you should forgive seventy times seven. Mathematicians amongst you will have worked out that that amounts to 490 times. But Jesus is not inviting us to keep careful records, but is setting a standard that makes record keeping impractical. He does not give us a maths-lesson, but a grace-lesson. Who can truly forgive seventy times seven—or even seventy-seven times—while keeping track? Who can forget the other person's sins while putting chalk marks on the wall? To keep track is not to forgive but is rather to record progress toward the day when we can quit forgiving. Forgiving is not a matter of mathematics but is about relationships.

Jesus then goes on to tell the parable of the unmerciful servant. He prefaces his story with the words "The kingdom of heaven is like" Jesus is saying this is the way Christians should behave. The debt owed by the first servant to his king was unimaginably large. When Jesus says "ten thousand talents," he multiplies the largest unit of money by the largest Greek number. We are talking here of a debt that equated to 60 million days wages for a working man. An impossible amount for anyone to repay let alone a slave who earned very little. But we shouldn't get hung up on the numbers, we just need to understand that this was a debt of unimaginable size. In comparison the debt owned by the second debtor was much smaller, the equivalent to one hundred days labour and feasibly a debt that could be repaid given time. That was all the second debtor was asking for, a little patience.

The willingness to forgive is an essential component of the Christian life. It is no accident that when the disciples asked Jesus how they should pray he taught, Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Maybe we could reflect upon the words of the eighteenth century hymn writer Robert Robinson when he wrote

O to grace how great a debtor Daily I'm constrained to be

Let that grace, Lord, like a fetter Bind my wand'ring heart to thee

And yet we frequently find it hard to forgive and even harder to forget. Maybe we have a perception that we are in the right and that the other person is at fault. Maybe we think that by offering forgiveness we would appear weak and might be taken advantage of. Maybe we have a sense that our wrongdoings are minor compared to the other person. All sorts of reasons why we find it difficult to forgive. Yet we should remember the extent of forgiveness that God has extended to us. Immeasurable in comparison to the forgiveness we are being asked to extend to others. Place the parable in the context of our daily lives and forget not the words of verse 35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart"

The other significant players in the parable are the other servants who had observed what had taken place. They clearly were unhappy at what they perceived was an injustice. The fact that the first debtor owed so much money suggests that he was someone whom the king favoured, so they might have been cautious about approaching the king to tell what had happened to the second debtor. But they did go to the king and tell. If they had remained silent then the injustice would never have been resolved. As followers of Jesus Christ we have a responsibility to speak out against injustice whenever we see it. I recall the words of the

18<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher Edmund Burke “All that is required for evil to prevail is for good people to do nothing”. We have a responsibility to stand alongside the marginalised, the oppressed the ignored in our society. We have a responsibility to speak to those in power in order that change may occur. That may require courage and persistence, it may make us unpopular but I believe it is as much a Christian imperative as is that of forgiveness.

The challenge for us this week might be to reflect upon those situations where we have been hurt and ask ourselves have we forgiven the person that hurt us. We might be challenged to reflect upon those situations where we should speak out and then take action so to do.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

As we recall our Old Testament reading where the Israelites were guided by fire as well as cloud, we remember that fire is also a refiner and purifier.

### **Let us pray**

Gracious God, our world is broken.  
There is so much injustice and so much that is wrong.  
Come, Lord, with your refiner’s fire, and cleanse our world.

We look out into a society, and a country torn apart by the impact of Coronavirus and the way it has affected so many of us differently. As we wait for the dawn, for the end of this time of darkness, we see great injustice in the way the virus has affected those already vulnerable.  
We see isolation and mental health crises. We see joblessness and livelihoods destroyed, and racial injustice highlighted.  
Come, Lord, with your refiner’s fire, and cleanse our world.

We look out into a world where so much is still wrong – so much is not as we would wish it.  
As we look out onto that world, Holy God, show us a road to healing.  
We see poverty, and many people going to bed hungry tonight.  
We see climate change, continuing to affect the most vulnerable, continuing to destroy livelihoods around the world.  
We see structures and systems built to allow the rich to get richer and the poor, poorer.  
Come, Lord, with your refiner’s fire, and cleanse our world.  
And let it begin with me.  
Living God, show me what is mine to do.  
In Jesus’ name we pray,  
Amen

### **Hymn: StF 508 Purify my heart**

Purify my heart, Let me be as gold and precious silver.  
Purify my heart, Let me be as gold, pure gold,  
Refiner's fire, My heart's one desire  
Is to be holy, Set apart for You, Lord,  
I choose to be holy, Set apart for You, my Master,  
Ready to do Your will

Purify my heart, Cleanse me from within And make me holy  
Purify my heart, Cleanse me from my sin, deep within.  
Refiner's fire, My heart's one desire  
Is to be holy, Set apart for You, Lord,  
I choose to be holy ,Set apart for You, my Master  
Ready to do Your will.

**Closing Words**

As we go from this place,  
May we go with the fire of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.  
May we go out to see a world where your justice burns, brighter than ever.  
Amen.

**Blessing**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forever. Amen

**Sending Hymn: StF 407 Hear the call of the kingdom**

Hear the call of the kingdom, ;Lift your eyes to the King  
Let His song rise within you As a fragrant offering  
Of how God, rich in mercy, Came in Christ to redeem  
All who trust in His unfailing grace.

Hear the call of the Kingdom To be children of light  
With the mercy of heaven, The humility of Christ;  
Walking justly before Him, Loving all that is right,  
That the life of Christ may shine through us.

King of Heaven, we will answer the call.  
We will follow, bringing hope to the world.  
Filled with passion, filled with power to proclaim  
Salvation in Jesus' name.

Hear the call of the Kingdom To reach out to the lost  
With the Father's compassion In the wonder of the cross,  
Bringing peace and forgiveness, And a hope yet to come:  
Let the nations put their trust in Him.

King of Heaven we will answer the call.....

Songwriters: Keith Getty / Stuart Townend / Kristyn Getty