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**Opening affirmation from Psalm 138 <sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart;  
**before the 'gods' will I sing praise to you.**

<sup>2</sup> I will bow down towards your holy temple and will praise your name  
because of your love and faithfulness;  
**for you have glorified your name and your word above all things.**

<sup>3</sup> In the day that I called to you, you answered me;  
**and put new strength in my soul.**

<sup>4</sup> All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord,  
**for they have heard the words of your mouth.**

<sup>5</sup> They shall sing of the ways of the Lord,  
**that great is the glory of the Lord.**

<sup>6</sup> Though the Lord be high, he watches over the lowly;  
**as for the proud, he regards them from afar.**

**HYMN SF 645 – All creatures of our God and King**

All creatures of our God and King,  
Lift up your voice and with us sing:  
Alleluia, alleluia!

Thou burning sun with golden beam,  
Thou silver moon with softer gleam:  
*O praise Him, O praise Him,*  
*Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!*

Thou rushing wind that art so strong,  
Ye clouds that sail in heaven along,  
O praise Him, alleluia!  
Thou rising moon, in praise rejoice,  
Ye lights of evening, find a voice:

Thou flowing water, pure and clear,  
Make music for thy Lord to hear,  
Alleluia, alleluia!  
Thou fire so masterful and bright,  
That givest man both warmth and light:

And all ye men of tender heart,  
Forgiving others, take your part,  
O sing ye, alleluia!  
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,  
Praise God and on Him cast your care:

Let all things their Creator bless,  
And worship Him in humbleness,  
O praise Him, alleluia!  
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,  
And praise the Spirit, Three-in-One:

St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) translated William Henry Draper (1855-1933)

### **Prayer of praise**

Let all things their Creator bless! Lord God Almighty, Creator of all that is, visible and invisible we declare our praise of You. We join in with the wordless praise of the stars and planets, the sun and the moon, the sea and the dry land, the valleys and the hills, and the plants and the animals. With our whole mind, soul and strength, we praise You in words and in actions. You alone are God, the only wise, the only good - the source of love, goodness and life – there is none like You. Praise be to the Father, praise be to the Son, praise be to the Holy Spirit, Three in One. O praise Him, hallelujah! Amen

### **Reading – Isaiah 51: 1-6 <sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> 'Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord: look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; <sup>2</sup> look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth.

When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many.

<sup>3</sup> The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord.

Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.

<sup>4</sup> 'Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: instruction will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations.

<sup>5</sup> My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.

<sup>6</sup> Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last for ever, my righteousness will never fail.

### **Reading – Matthew 16: 13-20 <sup>2</sup>**

<sup>13</sup> When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'

<sup>14</sup> They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' <sup>15</sup> 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?'

<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

<sup>17</sup> Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' <sup>20</sup> Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

## Talk

'Who do you think you are' is a programme about family history. It is a programme I enjoy -it is remarkable how long dead ancestors continue to have an emotional effect on the lives of participants on that programme today. It seems as if Isaiah is encouraging his hearers to go on the programme, to remember their ancestry, where they have come from. 'Look to the rock from which you were hewn, to Abraham and Sarah' - your many times great grandparents. Look to their lives and the effect it still has, and above all to the presence of God in their lives and to the promise of God to bless them, their descendants and the whole world through them.

Jesus too invites his disciples to discover his origins and destiny through a modified version of the question. Not, 'who do you think you are?' but 'who do people say I am?' and 'who do you think I am?' What is the popular view, the word on the street? Did you notice who people on the streets thought Jesus most resembled? John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah. If you know anything about those figures from Jewish history it might give you a different view of how Jesus lived and acted. They were the kind of people who spoke truth to power, who were more concerned about God's justice and right living than popularity. It certainly puts the lie to any notion of Jesus being a weak and wimpish do-gooder intent on telling people they just need to love people more and be a bit more accepting and we'll all get on better. This is much more like C S Lewis' famous quote about Aslan who represents Jesus in the Narnia Chronicles – 'He's not safe but he is good'. We must never try to tame Jesus.

The location in which this episode of 'who do you think I am?' featuring Jesus takes place is significant, namely Caesarea Philippi. The town was so named to promote Roman authority, hence the Caesarea, and endorsed by Philip, one of Herod the Great's sons, hence Philippi. The authority of Emperor Tiberius in far away Rome was enforced throughout his empire but especially in this town. In that period Roman emperors claimed to be gods. 'Caesar is lord' was a declaration of loyalty and obedience increasingly expected – a declaration of obedience. So for Peter to declare that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, the true and ultimate King, was either very brave or very foolish. If Jesus is Lord then Caesar isn't. If Jesus is the one in whom you put your trust and to whom you declare your loyalty and obedience then Caesar isn't. God's chosen King, Messiah, would surpass all earthly kings no matter how powerful.

'You are the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one, the Son of the Living God', says Peter with great boldness and sudden clarity of insight from beyond himself. Yes, says Jesus that is it. This declaration of faith, loyalty and obedience must have shocked the other disciples. Perhaps Peter himself was surprised thinking, 'I wonder where that came from?' Jesus however is very clear, secure in what is happening. He wants to encourage his disciple so he says, if you are going to put those fine words into action it will mean living up to that nickname, Peter the rock, I gave you. You will need to be rock-like - ready to remain strong and dependable.

The meaning of what Jesus goes on to say about what, or perhaps who, J will build the Church has caused debate ever since. The back and forth of that debate needn't detain us now but we can notice that Jesus says something vital about the Church and that is, 'I will build my Church' and it will stand firm against all attacks, perils and dangers.

In such uncertain and difficult times for the Church and its churches that should bring comfort and hope. We cannot and do not have to build and rebuild the Church. Jesus takes care of that. It is in safe hands.

However, here we are reminded that the Church is about people, people like Peter, brave and fearful, loyal and cowardly, and also full of fine words and deeds that do not match them – people like us then.

Jesus doesn't say much about Church, he is much more concerned to describe the Kingdom of Heaven or of God as we have seen in recent weeks. This is one of those rare occasions when he uses this word Church, ἐκκλησία (ekklesia) which means a gathering, an assembly of people – nothing more and nothing less. Once again we are reminded that church is people and not all those other necessary but lesser things we tend to make it. Yet there is something unique and particular about this group of people, this gathering of ordinary fallen, forgetful and fickle people and that is they declare, "Jesus is Lord" as Peter did. Now this isn't about mere words it is, as Paul says in Romans 10, 'if you declare with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved'. It is lips and heart, word and spirit, outward declaration and inward trust that matters.

Believing and living Jesus is Lord, that God raised him from the dead, the proof he is God's chosen King, the anointed Messiah, the Lord of lords, is what distinguishes the people who are the Church. It requires a costly, life-changing commitment to live Jesus is Lord – to follow the first commandment given by God, 'you shall have no other gods before or except me'. That tells us this is a lifetime commitment with regular renewal required. It affects every aspect of our lives, every day of the week and every decision we make.

Churches are more vulnerable at the moment than they have been for some time but the Church is safe, it has a glorious future because Jesus will build it. He is inviting us all to be part of his Church here on earth now. He is inviting all those who are prepared to declare and to live out 'Jesus is Lord' to be his Church, his witness, his continuing presence on earth. He will establish it firm and strong whatever happens around us. Have you come to that place when you have made Jesus Lord of your life? If not might now by the moment? Is now the time to renew your commitment? What gets in the way? Is now the time to admit failings and to receive forgiveness and to remake your commitment? We all need to do that from time to time, so let us pray.

### **Personal prayer of Confession and Commitment**

We thank you, Father, for Jesus' call to follow him.

We thank you for moments of profound joy and faith

when we have experienced the certainty of your presence and grown in trust and belief.

We ask for your help when faith does not come so easily:

when the clamour of life drowns out your still small voice;

when we are overwhelmed by our own or other people's problems and cannot feel your touch;

when the ways of the world and the stories of inhumanity and injustice mean it is easier to see darkness than light.

Father you do not call perfect people, You call us

and to be honest we find it hard.

In the difficult times sustain us with the knowledge of your love and deepen our faith so we can withstand the challenges and temptations of life. Amen

### **Hymn STF 331** <sup>3</sup>

King of kings, Majesty,  
God of heaven living in me.  
Gentle Saviour, closest Friend,  
Strong Deliverer, Beginning and End:  
all within me falls at Your throne.  
*Your majesty, I can but bow;  
I lay my all before You now.  
In royal robes I don't deserve,  
I live to serve Your majesty.*

Earth and heaven worship You,  
love eternal, faithful and true,  
who bought the nations, ransomed souls,  
brought this sinner near to Your throne:  
all within me cries out in praise.  
*Your majesty, I can but bow;*

### **Prayers for others**

Loving Father, you call us into relationship with you and with each other.  
We are called to live out the truth that Jesus is Lord,  
as members of the one Church Jesus is building.

We pray for the church, the people of God, to which we belong  
acknowledging before you that we have weaknesses as well as strengths,  
failures as well as successes. Give us a life together rooted in wisdom and faith,  
that we may not only speak of your love, but share it with others in practical ways.  
We pray for the other churches where we live,  
for those who lead them, and those who need them.  
Help us, together, to reflect to those around  
that difference does not have to mean division,  
and that we are united in love for you.

We pray for your worldwide church,  
for millions of Christians, in thousands of places, following you in a myriad different ways.  
Help those who face persecution and suffering because they name Jesus as Lord,  
and those who try to express your hope in the face of unimaginable hardship.

We pray for young people who have recently received examination results and their teachers as  
they seek to support them in confusing and uncertain times.....  
We pray for all school, university and college staff planning for a new term.....  
We pray for those we know in need.....  
We ask all our prayers in the name of Jesus, the head of the Church. **Amen.**

### **Lord's Prayer**

## **HYMN STF 363 <sup>4</sup>**

My Jesus, my Saviour,  
Lord, there is none like You.  
All of my days I want to praise  
the wonders of Your mighty love.  
My comfort, my shelter,  
tower of refuge and strength,  
let every breath, all that I am,  
never cease to worship You.

Shout to the Lord all the earth, let us sing  
power and majesty, praise to the King.  
Mountains bow down  
and the seas will roar  
at the sound of Your name.  
I sing for joy at the work of Your hands.  
Forever I'll love You, forever I'll stand.  
Nothing compares to the  
promise I have in You.

### **Final Blessing**

May we go out to declare with our lips that Jesus is Lord and to show that Jesus is Lord through our attitudes and our actions, and may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and with all those for whom we pray now and always. Amen

### **Acknowledgements**

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