

Circuit Service 15th May 2022

We meet in God's presence. God is with you whether you are in church with others or in your lounge on your own. Sit still for a moment and in the quietness say, 'thank you God for your presence with me'. You may wish to say it several times.

God is both intimate and almighty. We thank God for the immediacy of his presence. Now we sing the praise of God in his greatness.

Hymn H&P 8 StF 53 'How shall I sing that majesty'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOI-YWWpEXk>

<p>1 How shall I sing that majesty which angels do admire ? Let dust in dust and silence lie ; sing, sing, ye heavenly choir. Thousands of thousands stand around thy throne, O God most high ; ten thousand times ten thousand sound thy praise ; but who am I ?</p> <p>2 Thy brightness unto them appears, whilst I thy footsteps trace ; a sound of God comes to my ears, but they behold thy face. They sing because thou art their sun ; Lord, send a beam on me ; for where heaven is but once begun there alleluias be.</p>	<p>3 How great a being, Lord, is thine, which doth all beings keep ! Thy knowledge is the only line to sound so vast a deep. Thou art a sea without a shore, a sun without a sphere ; thy time is now and evermore, thy place is everywhere.</p> <p>John Mason (c. 1645–1694)</p>
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Prayer

Awesome God, as close as breathing and greater than the universe itself, we are grateful to be invited into your presence to worship you. With the seraphs we cry out 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of your glory'. With the psalmist we declare 'great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; your greatness no one can fathom.' With the twenty-four elders we say, 'you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'

Your holiness, and depth of your love, mercy and grace reveal to us the paucity of our faith, our discipleship, our love and also the things in our lives of which we are ashamed, and wish were different. Once again, we are in desperate need of your forgiveness and transforming grace.

Silence

Hear Christ's life-giving words 'Your sins are forgiven.'

Help us loving God not just to hear those words of forgiveness, but to accept and live their reality.

In the name of Christ.

Amen

Activity

If you're on your own I invite you to find your favourite hymn. If you haven't got a hymn book available write out as much of the hymn or sing out as much of hymn as you can remember. Recall why it's your favourite hymn - is it the words, the tune or the combination or is it an association with an event or a person. Read/sing/remember and give thanks.

If you're in church, you are invited to share with your neighbour what your favourite hymn is and why.

Some of you may have difficulty, claiming to like lots. Please just choose one from the long list and share why it's one of your favourites. Enjoy listening to your neighbour's choice. Their words are a gift.

Hymn H&P 46 StF 436 What shall I do my God to love

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EwLu8gu-ew>

<p>1 What shall I do my God to love, my loving God to praise ? The length, and breadth, and height to prove, and depth of sovereign grace ?</p> <p>2 Your sovereign grace to all extends, immense and unconfined ; from age to age it never ends ; enfolds all humankind.</p> <p>3 Throughout the world its breadth is known, wide as infinity ; so wide it never passed by one, or it had passed by me.</p>	<p>4 My trespass was grown up to heaven ; but, far above the skies, in Christ abundantly forgiven, I see your mercies rise.</p> <p>5 The depth of all-redeeming love what angel tongue can tell ? O may I to the utmost prove the gift unspeakable !</p> <p>6 Come quickly, gracious Lord, and take possession of your own ; my longing heart vouchsafe to make your everlasting throne.</p> <p>Charles Wesley (1707–1788)</p>
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Reading Acts 11 v 1 – 18

Sermon

Who is in and who is out? That's the theme of chapters 10 & 11 of Acts. The lectionary has jumped over the extraordinary chapter 10. There is a seismic shift in chapter 10 which, I suspect we just don't get to the same extent today. It's so big there should be a Christian festival to mirror festivals such as Ascension Day and Ash Wednesday!! It's ginormous!! Non-Jews accepted as part of the Christian community without transitioning through Judaism. Peter in chapter 10 was faced with this amazing act of God. His thinking could only be seen as the work of the Spirit within him. These people who 24 hours earlier would have been 'out' in his eyes have been revealed as 'in' by the revelation of God.

We have picked up the story at the beginning of chapter 11. Jerusalem was still the headquarters, the nerve-centre, of the church. Peter went there because he was based there, and this movement of God needed to be shared. What greets him was not rejoicing at this new work of God, but concern. Not primarily concern about non-Jews, but about Peter. Had he lost it? Had Peter stepped outside. Is Peter still in or is he now out? We read he was criticised by the 'circumcised believers. This isn't some fringe group like we meet in some of the letters. This group are the mainstream. Peter was one of them before the incidents of chapter 10. The depiction of them as 'circumcised believers' indicates circumcision was an important part of their identity. And what is the criticism? It is that Peter went into the house of someone uncircumcised and ate with them. Such an act was abhorrent to that group who were questioning him. The challenge was not one of disbelief that Cornelius and co could have received the Holy Spirit or indeed that Peter was wrong to baptise them. No, the criticism is based around religious identity. A religious identity they'd grown up with. A religious identity grounded, they believed, in the scriptures. A religious identity tied up in separateness. They kept themselves separate to remain pure. What Peter did was to risk all that. So, Peter had no right to enter the house and had no right to eat. By doing so Peter made himself impure and demonstrated such a lack of awareness of basic, fundamental traditional Judaism. His behaviour was unacceptable.

Let's jump over the recounting of the event itself and move directly to verse 15. Peter here is clear what happened to Cornelius and co was not the result of stunning life changing preaching. He'd only just

finished his sermon introduction, not even got to the first of his 3 points, when God couldn't wait any longer and the Holy Spirit came. And boy did the Holy Spirit come! He came in the same way as at Pentecost itself. Peter in his account hasn't sought to defend himself. He has attempted to give an account of God at work. The underlying challenge is, if God has done this what does that mean; not least for us and our understanding of religious identity. This fundamental characteristic of being 'in' was being rocked to the core and in the coming verses radically put to one side at least for the moment. Peter and Luke are articulating that it is the Spirit which is the primary mark of acceptance. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit which declares who is in and who is out. As Jimmy Dunn expresses it in his commentary 'it is the encounter between the open heart and the open-hearted God which matters, however, it comes about and however it may be expressed.'

This matter would come back and back several more times in Acts. The sad thing is it keeps coming back and back in almost every generation of the church – who is in and who is out. So often our religious identity seems to require us to define ourselves as opposed to someone else.

Listen to this story told by our President of Conference, Sonia Hicks, in her Presidential address:

"My Great-Aunt Lize was one of the first family members to arrive in Britain from Jamaica. She came with her membership ticket – her proof that she had accepted the invitation to be at the Lord's Table (evidence that was 'in') On the first Sunday morning in this country she got dressed in her best clothes – her Sunday best, as she had always done in Jamaica – and headed to the nearby Methodist Church just down the road from where she was now living. Not exactly sure when the service was to begin, Great-Aunt Lize arrived as the congregation was singing the first hymn. She sneaked in at the back and prepared to worship God with her Methodist family, as she was used to doing.

When the hymn was ended, the minister came from the front of the church and, on reaching Great-Aunt Lize, asked her where she was from. She explained that she was newly-arrived from Jamaica and started to reach for her membership ticket in her handbag. 'Your sort go to the other church,' said the minister not even noticing the ticket. Great-Aunt Lize was confused: 'My sort?' she repeated. 'Isn't this a Methodist church?' 'Yes, it is a Methodist church,' said the minister, 'but people like you go to the church down the road.' His words started to make sense to my Great-Aunt Lize. By 'people like me this minister meant black people. He was saying black people were not welcome, not even black Methodists.

Hiding her hurt, Great-Aunt Lize asked: 'Can I just stay until the end of the service today?' 'No,' said the minister. 'Your presence is upsetting my members. Please leave now.' So, my Great-Aunt Lize gathered her things and left that place of worship."

If Cornelius had visited the church in Jerusalem the conversation would have been the same as the one above. First century, twentieth century. We can find without any difficulty stories like these from every century.

Looking back, it obvious that Gentiles are part of God's family the church. Looking back, it is obvious that black, brown, white people are part of God's family the church. Hindsight is a marvellous thing. Who today are we looking at and believing with conviction they're 'out'. They don't belong. It is clear they can't be 'in'?

God is total pest – no sooner have we built the fence, sometimes erected on a foundation based on an understanding of tradition and scripture, that define who's 'in' and who's 'out' than he comes along and moves the fence.

So, we build our fence. The fence is built to define who's 'out' and who's 'in'. Sometimes the fence has its foundations in an understanding of tradition and scripture. Then God comes along and moves the fence. And God smiles and says look again at my word. Look again at my work through history. 'You'll see,' says God, 'if I hadn't moved the fence earlier, you'd have been on the wrong side. You'd have been 'out''!

<p>1 There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea ; there's a kindness in his justice which is more than liberty.</p> <p>2 There is plentiful redemption in the blood that has been shed ; there is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the Head.</p> <p>3 There is grace enough for thousands of new worlds as great as this ; there is room for fresh creations in that upper home of bliss.</p>	<p>4 For the love of God is broader than the measures of the mind ; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.</p> <p>5 But we make his love too narrow by false limits of our own ; and we magnify his strictness with a zeal he will not own.</p> <p>6 If our love were but more simple we should take him at his word ; and our lives would be illumined by the presence of our Lord.</p> <p>Frederick William Faber (1814–1863)</p>
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Prayers

Loving God, intimately involved with your world hear the cries of your people for the world in need.

Lord, we cannot start anywhere but with Ukraine. Hear us Lord in this prayer from Christian Aid

God of all peoples and nations,
Who created all things alive and breathing,
United and whole,
Show us the way of peace that is Your overwhelming presence.
We hold before you the peoples of Ukraine and Russia,
Every child and every adult.
We long for the time
When weapons of war are beaten into ploughshares
When nations no longer lift up sword against nation.
We cry out to you for peace;
Protect those who only desire and deserve to live in security and safety
Comfort those who fear for their lives and the lives of their loved ones
Be with those who are bereaved.
Change the hearts of those set on violence and aggression
And fill leaders with the wisdom that leads to peace.
Kindle again in us a love of our neighbour,
And a passion for justice to prevail and a renewed recognition that we all play a part in peace.
Creator of all hear our prayer
And bring us peace. Make us whole.
Amen

Let us be still for a moment

We pray for those who feel or have been made to feel on the outside. For those shunned by society and by the church. For those excluded because they are different.

Let us be still for a moment.

We pray in silence for our church and for those we carry on our heart.

Let us be still

Lord's Prayer

Hymn H&P 745 StF 564 O Thou who camest from above

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3UYybc7Xa0>

<p>1 O thou who camest from above the pure celestial fire to impart, kindle a flame of sacred love on the mean altar of my heart !</p> <p>2 There let it for thy glory burn with inextinguishable blaze, and trembling to its source return, in humble prayer and fervent praise.</p>	<p>3 Jesus, confirm my heart's desire to work, and speak, and think for thee ; still let me guard the holy fire, and still stir up thy gift in me —</p> <p>4 Ready for all thy perfect will, my acts of faith and love repeat, till death thy endless mercies seal, and make the sacrifice complete.</p> <p>Charles Wesley (1707–1788)</p>
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Blessing

Christ our risen and exalted King
make us faithful and strong to do his will
that we may reign with him in glory;
and may almighty God bless us,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen**

Alleluia!

Go in joy and peace to love and serve the Lord.

In the name of Christ. Alleluia!

Methodist Worship Book (slightly adapted)