

Basingstoke & Reading Circuit Service

5 July 2020

Greeting

Lord, let your spirit greet us here, to mend the body, mind and soul.

Call to worship

All you who are thirsty,
This is the place for water.
All you who are hungry,
This is the place to be fed.

Why spend your earnings on what is not food?
Why pay for that which fails to satisfy?

Here, without money,
Here, without price,
All may enjoy the bread of heaven.

God speaks,
And all who listen will have life.

HYMN StF 11, H&P 7

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| <p>1 Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty !
Early in the morning our song shall rise
to thee :
holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty,
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity !</p> <p>2 Holy, holy, holy ! All the saints adore
Thee:
casting down their golden crowns
around
the glassy sea ;
cherubim and seraphim falling down
before thee,
who wert, and art, and evermore shalt
be.</p> | <p>3 Holy, holy, holy ! Though the
darkness hide thee,
though the sinful human eye thy glory
may not see,
only thou art holy ; there is none
beside thee,
perfect in power, in love, and purity.</p> <p>4 Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty !
All thy works shall praise thy name in
earth and sky and sea ;
holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty,
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity !</p> |
|--|---|
- Reginald Heber (1783–1826) *(alt.)*

Prayers of Approach & Confession

*To whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life,
and we have believed and have come to know
that You are the Holy One of God.*

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Let us pray.

God who is with us
At our beginning and our end
Be with us now
Help us to find you
In the chaos of our lives
Let your light shine in our darkness
So that we may be guided
To walk in your ways all the days of our life.
Lord, you are a present help in trouble
Come revive, redeem, restore
In our darkness come as light
In our sadness come as joy
On our troubles come as peace
In our weakness come as strength
Come Lord to our aid
Revive, redeem, restore us, O Lord
Open our eyes to your presence
Open our minds to your grace
Open our lips to your praises
Open our hearts to your love
Open our lives to your healing
And be found among us.

We give you thanks for this community of ours, for our faith, for the support we receive here, for the good we are one to another. You promised to be with us when we are gathered together in prayer, and as you are with us now, may you be our aid and may your will be done.

May the healing grace of your love, O lord, so transform us
That we may play our part in the transfiguration of your world,
From a place of suffering
To a realm of infinite light, joy and love.
Make us so obedient to your spirit
That our life may become a living prayer,
And a witness to your unfailing presence.

Lord's Prayer

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[HYMN StF 348, H&P 256](#)

1
He is Lord, he is Lord;
he is risen from the dead, and he is Lord;
every knee shall bow, every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord.

2
He is King, he is King;
he will draw all nations to him, he is King;
and the time shall be when the world shall
sing
that Jesus Christ is King.

3
He is love, he is love;
he has shown us by his life that he is love;
All his people sing with one voice of joy
that Jesus Christ is love.

4
He is life, he is life;
he has died to set us free and he is life
and he calls us all to live evermore,
for Jesus Christ is life.

Anonymous

Readings

Acts 8:26-40 Philip on the Road to Gaza

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶ As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” ³⁷ [\[E\]](#) ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took

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Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Acts 9:1-9 Paul on the Road to Damascus

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

SERMON

Luke 24:45-49 The new order

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

We have spent the last month on the book of Ruth, in which one of the main messages is that gentiles who join themselves to Israel may have important work to do. In the case of Ruth, the son whom she bore was an ancestor of the great king David, and was therefore an ancestor of Jesus. Matthew sets this out in the genealogy at the start of his gospel.

Now, in the episode of Philip the apostle bringing about the conversion of the Ethiopian, we see more formative work being done. This rich important man was an official of the powerful state of Nubia (loosely referred to as 'Ethiopia'), which is now what we call Sudan, all the way up the Nile, beyond Egypt. Nubia was rich because it had gold, and this senior official of the treasury had come to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple.

The account has him paused in his long journey on the desert road, reading Isaiah, and Philip is able to help him understand the difficult text he is reading. Notice that the official is both rich and gracious; without standing on his dignity, he admits that he does not understand the text, and he invites Philip into his chariot and they sit down together

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to discuss the future which Isaiah pointed to. This is of course the Good News, the story of Jesus.

We are of course familiar with the 'Suffering Servant' text in Isaiah, and with the importance we attach to it as a foreshadowing of the person of Jesus, his suffering and his humiliation. How did this sound to the Ethiopian? He had so much to lose, but his response seems to have been unhesitating; he asked to be baptised, and as they travelled along, they spotted water, which he took as the opportunity for baptism.

The orthodox Church of Ethiopia takes this as the moment of its foundation; but I want to steer our thoughts away from the happy moment and towards the terror of the decision made. A rich, well set-up and respected man stands on the verge of abandoning his comfort and security, and having made the decision, 'goes on his way rejoicing'. How eloquent Philip must have been, and how great the moral compass of the Ethiopian, who could imagine a worthwhile future even when it is described in terms of suffering.

Let us now turn to Saul, the scourge of the infant Church, who had pursued, persecuted and done his best to obliterate Christian leaders and their communities. The facts are sparse: the collapse on the road, the flash of light. How would we describe it today? A seizure, a fit, perhaps a stroke? The sudden realisation that he has been living his life all wrong, that everything he thought important had to be scrapped, that he was finished and maybe that death was upon him

Well, he did not die physically, but he died to his previous self. Saul in that moment became Paul, and embarked on the career which extended, nurtured and developed the early church all round the eastern Mediterranean, as you well know. It also led to his execution in Rome, when he was about 68.

But what vision did Paul see, as he lay there on the Damascus road? What terrifying demands stunned him, and took away his sight? How much courage did it take to recover, to cast away his old self and start to lead the new life which was so utterly different from the old, and included the direst of outcomes.

You will remember, I think that passage from Matthew's gospel when Jesus explains the severity of his demands on his disciples, the loyalty he insists upon, and how that loyalty will turn people even against their own families. He also says,

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care.^[a]³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.³¹ So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.¹

How can we reconcile the terrible forecasts of Isaiah and Paul's vision on the Damascus road with this message of care, that says that we are so comprehensively within God's kindly power that even the most trivial detail of our being – the hairs of our head, are

¹ Matthew 10:29-31

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known; and that even tiny creatures to which no-one gives a thought – sparrows – are not allowed to perish with God knowing and weighing.

It all sounds marvellous, but let us not take the easy route. How would you explain about the hairs of your head or the sparrows to say, someone with a terrible terminal illness, lying there in constant suffering; or what would you say to the person getting off cattle trucks with many others at Auschwitz, all having a fair idea of what awaited them? What would you say when they demanded, “where is God now? Is he really in control? Why is he allowing this?”

Of course, you can get some way to an answer by talking about free-will. We have the liberty to sin, of that is what we want to do; and we can also talk about how the world is what it must be, a self-developing system which has violence at its core. The fit survive, and the weak do not. It’s just a brute fact about existence.

But I want to focus on the part of the question which says, “where is God now?” in the midst of suffering. The answer is, he is on the cross. What the story of the crucifixion tells us is that God, through Jesus, shares in our sufferings, and knows what they are like. How easy it would have been for Jesus to escape suffering and death; he could have slipped away quietly before he was arrested, or he could have changed his story at his trial and said some soothing words to defuse the accusation. But he did not. He chose in favour of the cross, and by doing that, he chose to be with us, come what may.

So, the message which Philip explained to the Ethiopian, and which Paul saw with blinding sight in his moment of collapse, is terrible only in part. It is also a message that we are not alone, and if we do fall, then God will be with us all the way.

[HYMN StF 520, H&P 548](#)

1

Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart
and a discerning mind;
give, as I play the Christian's part,
the strength to finish what I start
and act on what I find.

2

When, in the rush of days, my will
is habit-bound and slow,
help me to keep in vision still
what love and power and peace can fill
a life that trusts in you.

3

By your divine and urgent claim,
and by your human face,
kindle our sinking hearts to flame,
and as you teach the world your name
let it become your place.

4

Jesus, with all your Church I long
to see your kingdom come;
show me your way of righting wrong
and turning sorrow into song
until you bring me home.

Thomas Caryl Micklem
(1925–2003)

Communion (optional – see separate sheets)

Prayers for Intercession

O Jesus our Lord, as in times past not all the sick and suffering found their way to your side, but had to have their hands taken, or their bodies carried, or their names mentioned. So we, confident of your goodness, bring others to you.

As in times past, you looked at the faith of friends and let peace and healing be known. Look on our faith, even our little faith,

All: AND LET YOUR KINGDOM COME.

We name before you those for whom pain is the greatest problem; who are remembered more for their distress than their potential; who at night cry, "I wish to God it were morning", and in the morning cry, "I wish to God it were night."

<Specific intercessions>

Lord Jesus Christ, lover of all,

All: BRING HEALING, BRING PEACE.

We name before you those whose problem is psychological; those haunted by the nightmares of their past, or the spectres of the future; those whose minds are shackled to neuroses, depression or fears, who do not know what is wrong, or how to pray.

<Specific intercessions>

We name before you those in whose experience light has turned to darkness, as the end of a life or the breaking of a relationship leaves them stunned in their souls and silent in their conversation, not knowing where to turn or whom to turn to or whether life has a purpose any more.

<Specific intercessions>

And others whose troubles we do not know or whose names we would not say aloud, we mention in the silence which you understand.

<Silence>

Lord God, you alone are skilled to know the cure for every sickness and every soul. If, by our lives your grace may be known then in us, through us, or if need be, despite us,

All: LET YOUR KINGDOM COME.

This we ask in the name of him whose flesh and blood have made all God's children special.

AMEN.

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[HYMN StF 328 H&P 239](#)

1

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
does his successive journeys run;
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
till moons shall wax and wane no more.

2

For him shall endless prayer be made,
and praises throng to crown his head;
his name like sweet perfume shall rise
with every morning sacrifice.

3

People and realms of every tongue
dwell on his love with sweetest song;
and infant voices shall proclaim
their early blessings on his name.

4

Blessings abound where'er he reigns;
the prisoner leaps to lose his chains;
the weary find eternal rest,
and all who are in want are blest.

5

Let every creature rise and bring
its grateful honours to our King;
angels descend with songs again,
and earth repeat the loud amen.

Isaac Watts
(1674–1748)

Blessing

May the peace of Christ go with you,
wherever He may send you.
May He guide you through the wilderness,
protect you through the storm.
May He bring you home rejoicing
at the wonders He has shown you.
May He bring you home rejoicing
once again into our doors.

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Credits

Call to worship is drawn from Isaiah 55:1, found at 'A Wee Worship Book', 4th incarnation, p.43 Wild Goose Publications 1999.

Prayers for Intercession drawn from the liturgy for a service of healing in 'A Wee Worship Book' as above, p105ff. 'Blessing' is from Celtic Daily Prayer from the Northumbrian Community Harper Collins Publishers 2000 pp75-77, 82,85& 86.

Passages from the Bible are taken from New International Version

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