

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Revd Tim Swindell. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church - pray for them as they pray for you.

Call to Worship:

Loving God, we are here to worship.
You have called each of us by name, we belong to you.
Pour out your Spirit on us, we pray,
that we may know your love for us today.

God of creation, the wilderness belongs to you,
and it is there you often call us to find you.
From the wastelands of our lives,
we seek you as did those who sought John by the Jordan.
We come to you asking for cleansing and renewal,
joyfully acknowledging that we belong to you.

Amen.

Prayer of Adoration:

Lord, you embrace us before we know it.
You know us by name long before we hear your call.
We belonged to you from the first;
the welcome was always waiting.
In joy, we realise that we are beloved,

and we turn from our ways to yours.

Amen.

Hymn: O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder (Singing the Faith 82)

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here

https://youtu.be/bLz3Xv2Hr_4

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 power 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!*

When through the woods and forest glades I wander
I hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze:

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee...

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, my Saviour God, to thee...

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, my Saviour God, to thee...

Stuart K Hine (1899-1989)

vv 1,2,4 based on O store Gud 1885 by Carl Gustaf Boberg (1859-1940)
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Prayer of Confession:

The last two years have changed our lives in many ways.
As we begin to re-emerge, we confess we feel lost.
We find an arid wilderness before us.
We miss the certainties we previously thought secure,
and we search for spiritual help to help us find our way
through this new world.
But we are exhausted, Lord, and our heads droop.

Our faith is faltering, and we want short cuts, quick results.
Forgive us, Lord, for seeking renewal in the wrong places.
We raise our faces to you, O Lord, for in you we belong and are
known and loved, even when we no longer know who we
really are.

Call us by name.

Renew us that we may play our part in restoring the world.

Amen.

Let's spend a moment in quiet, reflecting on our lives.

Assurance of forgiveness

Lord, your forgiveness comes like cooling rain,
streams in the desert of our wild, disorientated wanderings,
calming our woes, washing our regrets into the sands
that will shockingly and surprisingly bloom
with new life, when we thought all the good seeds
within us had dried to barren husks.

From your forgiveness comes renewal,
and the strength to rise again like a phoenix
from the ashes of our wastelands,
wallowing in despair no more,
ready and able to move on – with you.

Amen.

Today's readings:

Isaiah 43:1-7

New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

Restoration and Protection Promised

43 But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

³For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

⁴Because you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.

⁵Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,

and from the west I will gather you;
⁶I will say to the north, 'Give them up',
and to the south, 'Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
⁷everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.'

Psalms 29

New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

The Voice of God in a Great Storm

A Psalm of David.

¹Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

²Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendour.

³The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.

⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

⁶He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

⁹The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, 'Glory!'

¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king for ever.

¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing-

fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

The Baptism of Jesus

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Reflection

The media, our televisions, the radio, the internet, social media – however we receive our news and views of the world – can sometimes seem to be filled with two kinds of people:

1. Those who are successful and powerful, who are intellectual and knowledgeable, physically fit and strong, wealthy and (often) famous for all that, and,
2. Those who have fallen from grace, have done something unwise, even foolish (it would seem), or have been found out – failing to be who we thought they were, or should be.

Just plucking a few names out of recent news – and I'll allow you to draw your own conclusions and categorise them as you see fit!

*Boris Johnson, Novak Djokovic, Desmond Tutu,
Prince Andrew, Joe Root, Mikel Arteta,
Rose Ayling-Ellis, Jeff Bezos.*

I could go on. You might know all of those names, you might know none – that doesn't matter, you can compile your own lists, I'm sure. You might even include a few names of family members, work colleagues or friends, who seem to be wise, or foolish. As with the names I have quoted, we might not always agree which heading they should come under, and at different times in their lives they may come under both headings.

When we think about ourselves, and our own circumstances, I wonder where we would place ourselves? Successful and wise, or foolish, or failing? After the events (or should that be non-events) of the last couple of years we might think of ourselves differently now to how we used to. It's been difficult to be successful recently. Most certainly, in the business I work with, many of the people I work with are struggling – both physically and mentally. Many have issues with having been away from work and are struggling to adapt to being back, while others have been working throughout and are completely exhausted.

It can be easy to equate that struggle, that tiredness, that stress, with failure, and a fall from grace, a perceived distance from God.

Our readings today reassure us that, however we may FEEL, the reality is different. The Prophet Isaiah writes at a time of great difficulty for the Jewish people, a time when they were in exile in Babylon, far from home and in captivity. It was a period when the people must have felt at times that their God had abandoned them and failed to protect them from captivity. They must have felt tempted to abandon God, to assimilate into the culture and practices of the Babylonians; tempted to abandon the covenant that God had established with them and to follow new ways.

In that context, Isaiah's message is both powerful and surprising. Through Isaiah, God says:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”

He goes on to speak of the love and passion that he has for his people, the honour in which he holds them, and the promise that he will bring them back together. His people should not fear, the exile and loss are temporary, his love is eternal.

Isaiah's message is a message of hope in dark times for the Jewish people in Babylon, and it is a message of confidence

and hope for us now too. Do not fear, God has redeemed us, liberated us from our cares, he knows us by name, we are his.

The message of the Psalmist is similarly encouraging and bold. Over Christmas we have been hearing the message of John's Gospel – God's word being made flesh. God's words have power and meaning. God's words brought Jesus to this world to be our guide, to provide the pattern for our lives, and to lift from us the burdens that we carry. We carry the weight of things we have done, or failed to do in the past, and Jesus's actions take that weight from us. The Psalmist declares that God's voice is powerful and mighty, full of majesty, and full of creative ability. He declares that God gives strength to his people and brings them peace. God's words, God's voice, speaking truth, hope and love. When we feel that our voices are weak and lacking power, lacking the ability to bring about necessary change, God's voice will always be there, filling the world, offering strength.

And so, as we turn to our words from Luke's account of Jesus' baptism by John, we hear the culmination of that hope of Isaiah and the Psalmist. The people, we hear, are wondering if John is the longed-for Christ, the Messiah, the one whom God has promised to send to save them. They are filled with hope and expectation. In their hearts they want John to be the one promised by God.

And John says – in effect – “You ain't seen nothing yet! Just wait, I'm just the messenger.” He says, “I'm not even good enough to untie the next one's sandals.” John declares that real change is coming – one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire, separating wheat from chaff.

As I read that familiar bit about wheat and chaff once again, I reflected on the many walks I have around the Hertfordshire countryside. At the right time of year, in the early autumn, as I pass the fields of ripening wheat and barley, I often do what my Dad taught me, taking a couple of ears, a couple of the seed-bearing heads, and rub them between my hands. The outer husks, the chaff, get rubbed off, and with a bit of careful blowing, and a bit more rubbing, you are left with the seeds – a tasty and nutritious snack.

Sometimes, today's passage from Luke is interpreted to mean that once Christ has separated good, believing, people from the rest – by inference the 'bad' people, those who are rejected will be condemned for ever – burnt in the fires of hell. But my reflections this week led me to a very different point, a very different conclusion. I spoke at the beginning about categorising people into those who are successful and appear powerful, and those who have been unwise. Of course, the reality is that we all fall into BOTH of those categories from time to time, but none of us are beyond redemption. None of

us ever cease to be loved by God. None of us ever fall beyond hope or the potential to hear God's powerful voice.

By making a conscious effort to follow Jesus, making a determined effort to follow up on our promises at baptism, so we make a deliberate effort to be like those grains of wheat that I rub between my hands. We rub away the bits that are worthless, that hinder us, that are now tasteless and unwholesome. And in so doing, we become more like what God wants us to be. We fulfil the promise that he built into us. We become strong and powerful because we reflect Christ in our being, in our actions, in our words.

But don't ever forget those bits of chaff, those bits we have now shed. Just like the seed, we couldn't have grown to be who we are without them. Our mistakes, our failures, and our errors have made us who we are. Without mistakes we cannot make progress. Without failure we cannot be creative. Without errors we cannot learn a better way.

We are disciples of Christ, pilgrims on a journey of discovery. Through hope, through listening for God's voice in the wilderness, and through dogged determination, we grow into all God wants us to be.

Amen

A time of prayer

Let us remember the Methodist Church throughout our own Circuit in Enfield, but also throughout the United Kingdom and in the wider world. Let us hold in our prayers the many communities of faith that are working and sometimes struggling to find an appropriate way forward during the continuing pandemic.

Let us pray:

Loving Lord of earth and heaven,
we thank you for the love which you have shown us
through your wonderful creation.

We pray for those who work to combat climate change;
for scientists researching new ways to fuel our needs;
for politicians to respond to the situation and to keep the
pledges they have made;
for us that we may seek ways to live that help preserve the
wonderful world that you have made.

As we celebrate your love for us,
May we love you in return.

Loving God of continents and countries,
we thank you for the love you have shown us which gives

us a sense of identity.
We pray for those who live in fear of war and civil strife;
for those who are threatened by oppression and violence;
for those who are driven to seek refuge and asylum in
other nations or states;
for us that we may value our common humanity and share
your love with others.

As we celebrate your love for us,
May we love you in return.

Loving God of wholeness and health,
we thank you for your love shown to us through the care
of healthcare workers and the National Health Service.
We pray for those suffering from stress as a result of the
covid pandemic;
for hospitals having to declare critical incidents;
for those suffering with long Covid;
For us that we may through the way we live keep ourselves
and others safe.

As we celebrate your love for us,
May we love you in return.

Loving God of cathedral, church and chapel,
we thank you for the places where we gather to worship
you.

We pray for those with responsibilities for their upkeep;
for those who are engaged in food banks and work with
refugees and asylum seekers;
for those who provide space and refreshment for people
to gather in safety and comfort and find companionship;
for us that our lives may always be those of your loving
and faithful disciples.

As we celebrate your love for us,
May we love you in return.

Loving God of friends and family,
we thank you for those who enrich our lives by their
kindness and love.
We pray for those who are separated from family and
friends as a result of Covid restrictions.
for those whose homes are places of neglect or abuse;
for those who feel isolated and alone;
for us that we, knowing how much we are loved, may not
be too busy to share a friendly word with others.

As we celebrate your love for us,
May we love you in return.

We rejoice that we are loved, and pray that refreshed by
that love we may seek ways to share your empowering and

refreshing love with those whom we encounter and those who do not know that they are loved.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer:

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,

and the glory are yours

now and for ever.

Amen.

Hymn: Just as I am, without one plea (STF 556)

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcFp0-4RZzc>

Just as I am, without one plea
but that you died to set me free,

and at your bidding, 'Come to me!'

O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fighting within and fears without,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am, you will receive,
Will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve:
because your promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am – your love unknown
has broken every barrier down –
now to be yours, yes, yours alone,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am, of that free love
the breadth, length, depth and height to prove,
here for a time and then above,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Charlotte Elliot (1789 - 1871)

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A blessing and sending out prayer

Holy Spirit, go with us into the world.

Re-source us with your power and your presence.

Father God, help us to know your love,
and that we are your beloved sons and daughters.

Lord Jesus Christ, help us to learn from you,
and to follow your example,
that we may share your love
with everyone we meet.

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, now, every day and evermore.
Amen.**

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