

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Nancy Hands. 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

Ps 77:13-15 : Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God? You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples. With your strong arm, you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

Let us praise the Lord.

Hymn: StF 15 The splendour of the king

Sing/Read/Pray/Proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ut5LBSi-YGE>

The splendour of the King,
clothed in majesty;
let all the earth rejoice, all the earth rejoice.
He wraps himself in light
and darkness tries to hide,
and trembles at his voice, and trembles at his voice.

*How great is our God,
sing with me: how great is our God.
And all will see how great, how great is our God.*

And age to age He stands,
and time is in His hands;
beginning and the end, beginning and the end.
The Godhead, Three in One,
Father, Spirit, Son,
the Lion and the Lamb, the Lion and the Lamb,
How great is our God...

Name above all names, worthy of all praise;
my heart will sing: how great is our God.
How great is our God...

Chris Tomlin (b. 1972), Ed Cash and Jesse Reeve

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God of all: from highest to lowest, from richest to poorest,
from privileged to disadvantaged, from strong to powerless,
you are our
Loving Father, keen to save, you sent your Son to show the
way.
We worship you.

Jesus, you love us and suffered for us, and showed us heaven on earth.

We worship you.

Holy Spirit, source of new life, rich in fruitfulness.

We worship you.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, love calling for action.

We worship you. Amen.

Lord, we know that following Jesus and doing your will does not guarantee an easy life. There are challenges and obstacles, priorities that seem so important, jobs to do and interests we want to pursue. We are sorry for so often doing things our way and in our time, rather than listening to your prompting and the wisdom of your Spirit. We are sorry for the excuses we make for putting off what you urge us to do; for retaliating when we are angry; for wanting to go our own way, by our own effort. We are sorry for our complacency and for letting you down. We know some things can't wait and that you call for action.

Forgive us Lord. Help us to make you the centre of our lives and to hear the urgency of your call. Amen.

Jesus took action when it was needed. He suffered on the cross, where our sins were nailed with him. We are forgiven. He paid the price for all our wrongdoing and set us free from the power of sin. Let us live in that freedom. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Reading

Luke 9: 51-62 NRSV

51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. **52** And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to prepare for his arrival, **53** but they did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem. **54** When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"^[a] **55** But he turned and rebuked them. **56** Then^[b] they went on to another village.

57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." **58** And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." **59** To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." **60** And Jesus^[c] said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." **61** Another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." **62** And Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Reflection

In the Message version of our Luke reading, the last verse reads 'No procrastination. No backward looks. You can't put God's Kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day!'

In one of Tom Wright's commentaries on Luke, he tells of one of his students - who was always late with assignments - who gave him a present of a book called something like 'The Penguin Book of Excuses'. It made me laugh. I actually Googled the title and found 'No More Rubbish Excuses' and 'No Fears, No Excuses' both by Penguin, and four more similar publications! Maybe these books are useful if you have used the excuse 'the dog ate my homework' more than once! We can all think of excuses for putting off what we know it would be right, or sensible or obedient to do, and we justify ourselves with our reasons. At the same time, we have to be aware we are neither super human nor indispensable, and use some discernment to do tasks in an appropriate order.

Luke begins this section saying Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem. We are in chapter 9 and he doesn't actually arrive in Jerusalem until chapter 19. In between, we have lots of stories and encounters. In his Gospel and in the book of Acts, Luke found the journey motif very helpful in telling the story of Jesus, and of the church. Perhaps it is to help us, in an unfolding and deepening way, to travel with Jesus towards his

Passion, but also to gain insight, little by little, into the Kingdom of God.

It is interesting that Jesus intended to travel the mountainous route, via Samaria, rather than the usual route down the Jordan valley. As he often did, he went where others wouldn't. It would have raised more than a few eyebrows, as political, ethnic and religious hostility between Jews and Samaritans had existed for 700 years. Jesus sent his messengers on ahead, to prepare for his arrival, so that precious time would not be wasted. He wanted everyone to have the chance to hear his message, however alien and despised they were, and he was willing to face rejection in trying. And the Samaritans did reject him and he was content to move on. James and John however, those Sons of Thunder, wanted the full force of their anger to be felt: 'Let's burn them down!' They perhaps recalled the story in the first chapter of 2 Kings, when Elijah faced an army captain, saying, "If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men.' That sounds very satisfying. They had rejected the man of God and were punished. But the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus proposed a better way. Only a little while earlier, Jesus had told the disciples, that if their presence and message were not welcomed, they were to shake the dust off their feet and move on. Retribution and revenge were thoughts and actions that

had no place on the journey with Jesus - with his mission or theirs.

In the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was criticised for not being harsh enough with soldiers from the South. He was asked, 'Why don't you destroy the enemy?' Lincoln replied, 'Do I not destroy my enemy by making him my friend?'

Sobering, considering that was war.

Just like our ability to defend our actions and conjure up the right excuse, we are very good at remembering Biblical quotations or precedent to support our worst behaviour, while we find it hard to recall those texts calling us to forgiveness, mercy and grace - once we are past the church porch.

The Epistle set for today comes from Galatians 5, and begins, 'For freedom, Christ has set us free.' It goes on to say, 'For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.' Paul then gives us a list of what he calls sins of the flesh: all the self-indulgent actions we should avoid, followed by a list of the fruits of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.'

The definition of freedom, as most people understand it, is 'the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants.'

Consequently, 'the state of not being imprisoned or enslaved'. We call ourselves a 'free country', with a right to vote, to worship as we wish and to voice our opinions and ideas. Freedom matters. But sometimes freedom is used as license - to do what the individual wants regardless of anyone else. That is what Paul is warning against. Christian freedom begins internally: the freedom of knowing we are loved and necessary in God's plan for the world, to act from love and pursue God's truth. We are freed from peer pressure, society's expectations, and our self-indulgent side, if we keep Jesus as our compass. The guidance of the Holy Spirit gives us the basis for our ethical, moral and selfless intentions, and how we act on them. Our everyday behaviour and our choices matter. That means priorities matter too, and that sometimes, our procrastination needs recognising and sometimes questioning by ourselves.

We all like to be in control - of our time, our lives and our destiny. Many of us border on being control freaks, about certain things. I am guilty of that when it comes to loading the dishwasher! We can easily feel disorientated and out of control in times of job loss, bereavement, sudden illness or accident. The loss of electricity or internet or phone signal can send us in a spin and make us feel helpless. Nothing temporal is certain; we live in an uncertain, chaotic world and our control is

something of an illusion. But we do have an anchor. Jesus knows we are not in control of our circumstances and invites us to give up the control we cling to, to him: in effect, to trust him, whatever happens. He is our model. He gave up his personal control to his Father. He allowed himself to be led into the chaos of our world and came out the other side victorious. He journeyed to Jerusalem, not to take or demonstrate his power and control, but to be obedient and show the power of humility and love.

It can often feel to us, with situations and disasters that go on around us and in the world, that God is not in control either. Part of our surrendering to him is in accepting we don't and probably won't know the reasons why things happen, but we do know that God in Jesus joins us, holds us and brings us through. To live by 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,' and believe that they are the enduring qualities which, under God's hand, will ultimately triumph over the chaos, will bring us the freedom and peace promised to us in the Gospel.

When the three would-be followers of Jesus approach him, in our Luke reading, Jesus' response is discouraging. He isn't impressed. His time is short and he requires committed followers, who know what they are getting in to and are ready to give up their itinerary for his. All three want to shape this

new faith around the lives they have already planned. What Jesus requires is for them to plan their new lives grounded in God's love, mercy and grace, in the direction he has for them. It is a big ask, and it is too much for all of them. Following God's lead is more than the emotional whim of the moment. It is more vital than our attention to homes and possessions, our other responsibilities and relationships, but if our whole lives are God-centered, what is necessary, kind and honorable will fit in. Time, when it is God-directed, can seem much more elastic than when directed by ourselves. 'Seize the day!' Begin with God, and look for those moments in front of us when we can follow his directing.

Isabella Gilmore is not someone in history who is widely known. As Head deaconess, she served to revive the ministry of women and establish their place within the Church of England. Her husband died in 1882 when she was 42, and in the face of opposition from her family, she decided to train as a nurse at Guy's Hospital, as a 'lady pupil'. When she qualified, she was quickly promoted to Ward Sister, where she expected to stay.

Out of the blue, she received a phone call from the Bishop of Rochester, asking her to establish and lead an Order of Deaconesses, to work in the poorest areas of London, which were in his Diocese. It seemed impossible to her. Her brother

had died and she had taken on responsibility for his children. The only administration she had done was as a ward sister; there was no brief as to how this would work, and she felt she had no experience for such work. She hesitated. The last day for responding was a Sunday and she went to church as usual, but she didn't know the preacher. His text was, 'Go work for me today in my vineyard'. To Isabella, it was if God had spoken directly to her, calling her to this new responsibility. When she got home she wrote a short note to the Bishop saying, 'I humbly accept your offer'. Having 'put her hand to the plough', she never looked back, nor regretted her decision, whatever the setbacks and difficulties.

I don't believe it is ever too late to make the decision to follow Christ. Most of us hesitate before jumping in feet first and God uses many channels and people to get through to us. But there is an urgency about the Kingdom message and we are to understand that discipleship carries a cost, and that cost needs to be weighed up before commitment can mean what it says. Our faith will make demands of us. What we can do is realistically assess what are the qualities God has given us; what talents do we have; what have we to offer and how best might it be best used in his service, guided by love from him and in us.

That doesn't mean that once we are given a task - in the church for example - we have to do it forever! That can be unhealthy for all concerned. It means being awake and alive to the moving Spirit of God and grasping those opportunities when they present themselves. If we are on a journey, the map we need is the one for where we are going, not the one that got us here. When we read a book, we don't get far if we keep recapping what has happened so far; we need to read on. Putting our hand to the plough, like Isabella Gilmore, means looking forward and trusting God for his plan, which is wiser than our own. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord God, we pray for our world of beauty and chaos. Wherever there is conflict, discord, hatred and revenge, bring to hearts and minds a desire to be reconciled and willing to work for peace.

Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for your Church, so often caught up in rules and regulations, straying from the freedom that is our inheritance in Christ. Give us a desire to keep Jesus at the centre and to be ready to serve you with dedication and joy.

Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer**

We bring to you our community and for all in it struggling with failure and disappointment in relationships. We pray for a desire to seek healing and not recrimination, and the determination to see through personal commitments with love.

Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer**

Compassionate God, you know the ones who are on our hearts today: the need, the sorrow, the fear, the loneliness and the pain. We name them silently before you now.

Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer**

We pray for those who may be hearing your still small voice calling them, but are afraid and reluctant to trust. Give us all a desire to listen, and the courage to follow you in faithfulness.

Lord in your mercy, **Hear our prayer. Amen**

We join together in the Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen.

Hymn: StF 664 Lord you call us to your service

Sing/Read/Pray/Proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtsubiBA78s>

Lord, you call us to your service,
each in our own way.
some to caring, loving, healing;
some to preach or pray;
some to work with quiet learning,
truth discerning,
day by day.

Life for us is always changing
in the work we share.
Christian love adds new dimensions
to the way we care.
For we know that you could lead us,
as you need us,
anywhere.

Seeing life from your perspective
makes your challenge plain,
as your heart is grieving over
those who live in pain.
Teach us how, by your compassion,
you may fashion
hope again.

Lord, we set our human limits
on the work we do.
Send us your directing Spirit,
pour your power through,
that we may be free in living
and in giving
all for you.

Marjorie Dobson (b. 1940)

Blessing

May God give us open hearts and willing minds to hear his call,
and strengthen us for his service.
And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be among
us and remain with us , now and always. Amen.

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