



September 5th 2021

Just because we cannot worship together in our Church building does not mean we cannot worship.

This short act of worship has been prepared for you to use at home.

There are links to youtube for each of the hymns.

Call To Worship

Our God is a Loving Father, always Faithful and True.

As we draw nigh to him, He draws even closer to us
and welcomes us into his presence –

So now we come to praise and worship him

To celebrate his glory and his greatness,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen!

Hymn StF 134 Christ whose glory fills the skies

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FpmaYlluuA>

Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
Christ, the true, the only light,
Sun of righteousness, arise,
triumph o'er the shades of night;
Dayspring from on high, be near;
Daystar, in my heart appear.

Dark and cheerless is the morn
unaccompanied by thee:
joyless is the day's return,
till thy mercy's beams I see,
till they inward light impart,
glad my eyes, and warm my heart.

Visit then this soul of mine;
pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
fill me, radiancy divine;
scatter all my unbelief;
more and more thyself display,
shining to the perfect day.

Psalm 146 New International Version (NIV)

¹ Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD, my soul.

² I will praise the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.

³ Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save.

⁴ When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;
on that very day their plans come to nothing.

⁵ Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God.

⁶ He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever.

⁷ He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets prisoners free,⁸ the LORD gives sight to the blind,
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

¹⁰ The LORD reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD.

Thanksgiving for life

Wonderful God, Creator and Friend, we praise you and give you thanks
for the remarkable experience of the life you have granted us.
For all of its highs and lows, its sweet and sour, pleasure and pain....

When the sun shines on our days and rain refreshes the land overnight,
when there is a bounce in our step and a song on our lips:
we will thank you, God of all life.

When the clouds are low and cold winds sting our face,
when the day's tasks wear us down and it becomes an effort to smile:
still we will thank you God of all life.

When a full moon shines and the night seems like a dear friend,
when we go to bed content, and sleep is deep and satisfying:
we will thank you God of all life.

When the night is pitch black and our lurking fears crawl towards us,
when we go to bed exhausted yet toss and turn all night:
still we will thank you, God of all life.

When blossom covers the fruit trees and rainbows are in the skies,
when our world seems full of promise, and our bodies glow with health:
we will thank you, God of all life.

When hail destroys the harvest and floods sweep the soil away,
when illness afflicts our bodies and each day is struggle against pain:
still we will thank you, God of all life.

When new creatures are being born and fresh growth seems everywhere,
when children's laughter rings and young people fall in love:
we will thank you, God of all life.

When age and decay seem all around and dear friends suffer and die,
when we grow frail and simple tasks take much time and effort:
still we will thank you God of all life.

For you are always with us, and you love each one of us.
You sent your Son to bring us life in all its fullness.
He gave his life, dying on a cross... but the grave could not hold him.
He rose again, and is alive for evermore.
For his saving and renewing power we praise you.
In the name of Christ, **Amen**

Confession

God of Compassion and mercy we turn to You in confession,
seeking Your healing for our broken lives and our broken world.
We acknowledge before You and in the presence of our sisters and brothers,

that we have not always listened for Your word,
neither have we obeyed Your commands to love as we have been loved;
to seek Your peace, and the unity of the church;
to forgive as we pray we may be forgiven.
We have allowed distrust and fear to rule our heart and diminish our lives,
We have created division and hurt
when we should have sought one another's good....

Forgive us all that is past, and renew us for all that lies ahead
reconciling us with each other and with You, our God.

The **Good News** is this:

Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation; who we have been is gone;
who we are yet to be, God is revealing to us day by day,
as we are shaped by the knowledge of God's mercy and reconciling love.
Know that in Jesus' name we are forgiven. May we know his peace. **Amen.**

Hymn StF 435 We come to you with no pretence

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryoyHD25xKk>

We come to you with no pretence, yet nourished by your grace.
We come as people needing love within this time and place.

We come confessing all we are, yet all we have to give.
We ask for your renewing power to teach us how to live.

We need your spirit to be strong, your risking, leaping faith,
that brings the love of God to bear in every aching space.

Then from this point, restored, renewed, we pledge to take your way;
to live responding to your call with each succeeding day.

(Andrew Pratt)

Lesson: Isaiah 35 (NRSV)

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.'

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;

the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸ A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;

the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people;

no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.

⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;

they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Sermon

35th chapter of Isaiah is a passage of hope written whilst God's people were exiled in Babylon, facing hardship and a sense of abandonment. The previous chapter paints a scene of an angry Yahweh bringing destruction upon a sinful land and leaving it desolate, but 35 starts far more optimistically:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

If they had abandoned God, he surely had not abandoned them. They were his people; people with whom he had made an everlasting Covenant. Their National faith stories are woven into a rich tapestry – we see cycles of victory and defeat, obedience and folly, apparent abandonment and then restoration. The history and poetry of the OT shows the faith of a people who saw God in all the events around them, a God who loved them, but who demanded faithfulness and obedience.

In this chapter the prophet begins with words of clear promise; words offering hope, words bidding them not to give up under their present distress and depression.

I suspect we can see similar cycles in our own stories, and in the life of our church. There are times when faith is hard and it seems as if we are swimming through treacle, and we wonder "What's the point?" and other times when we are filled with a sense of God's presence and purpose, and wonder why we were struggling?

We know the seasons of the soul in our own experience, and know too the hand of God upon our lives sustaining us, so when we sing the words of the hymn "*Days of darkness still come o'er me, Sorrow's paths I often tread,*" we empathise with the writer, but can also echo his declaration "*But the Saviour still is with me; By His hand I'm safely led.*"

Then the author goes on: The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom;

And if you think for a moment about his imagery you know the truth within it. Within the fellowship of our churches there are individuals who at one time seemed thirsty and dried up, and yet we have witnessed them blossom and flourish. Perhaps they initially lacked faith or confidence but we have seen them grow and flower, and show their beauty.

And just as we have known times of drought, we have known times of weakness. When we just did not seem to have the strength to carry on.

Sometimes our weakness is real, sometimes it is just in our mind, but feels real and sometimes it is just an excuse. My dad used to complain "I can't do that, I've got a bone in my arm"

Sometimes we feel weak because we are afraid –

Afraid we are not good enough – afraid we might fail – afraid we'll look stupid.

Hear Isaiah's words:

³ *Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.*

⁴ *Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear!*

Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.'

Most of us have been in situations which have terrified us, when we have been paralysed by fear – our legs turned to jelly, our mouths dried up, our hearts beating in our chests, so we should be able to empathise with others who are fearful, and whose hearts are racing. And declare to them '*Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.* God is always with us, sometimes almost close enough to touch, and that is why we can declare that there is no need to fear.

However, I must confess to having a little difficulty with Isaiah's next phrase. "*Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.*" Are we really supposed to hold this as true, the promise that vengeance will come? A God of vengeance seems out of kilter with the God revealed in the gospels as one who is always seeking the wayward, and forgiving the sinner.

So what is Isaiah really saying? Does it jar because we have not quite understood?

Biblical scholar Hendrik Peels suggests that there is within the Hebrew word *naqam*, a particular emphasis of "retribution that brings liberation to the oppressed" and that we best understand the term if we think of God's action as "restorative justice" rather than "vengeance." So perhaps the verse means "*Here is your God. He will put things right again*"

Isaiah then goes on to speak of the restoration of the blind, the deaf, the lame and the speechless, and perhaps we can take heart as we hear his words because we know that our ministry and service is sometimes impaired.

We can be blind to the needs of those around us, Blind to what God is trying to show us
Blind to the opportunities he gives...

We can be deaf to the cries of the hungry, the outcast and the downtrodden,
Deaf to the still small voice of God, and the promptings of the Holy Spirit

We can be speechless – silent rather than speaking out against injustice
Silent because we do not witness to our neighbours
Silent because our prayers are cold, and our praise half hearted.

We can be lame because we don't want to go out of our way.
Because it's too far, or too tiring...or because we have a bone in our arm.

We are blind, deaf, speechless and lame... But God does not condemn us for our failings...
God offers not condemnation – but healing.
God wants to take away all that is disabling us – restore us, equip us, fill us and heal us:

⁵ *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;*
⁶ *then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;

When we allow God to work within us, helping us to overcome the things that are holding us back. When we allow him to enable and empower us amazing things can happen.

In the wilderness and the dried up places of our community, as part of the Body of Christ, we can find practical ways to make a difference, and help provide rest and refreshment for those who need it..

Isaiah goes on ⁸ *A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.*

I think the writer, who is declaring that exiles will be restored to their own land has one eye on a previous time of exile, when they were in Egypt. In contrast to the 40 years wandering around in circles in the desert on the way to the promised land, Isaiah prophesies a more straightforward return when they leave Babylon. He pictures it as a highway where no traveller shall go astray.

Finally, He concludes with words which Brahms eagerly snapped up for his German Requiem. And I hear Brahms music in my head whenever I read the words:

¹⁰ *And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

This verse is a glorious declaration. Just as the Children of Israel looked forward to returning home to Jerusalem their spiritual home, so we Christians who are ransomed and redeemed because of what God has done for us in Christ, look forward to being part of God's eternal Kingdom. The Kingdom is already here, but it is both now but not yet, and the Kingdom in all its fulness is promised, but yet to be realised.

It is a Kingdom we enter singing, and we are filled with joy when we arrive, and even as we journey gladness and joy will overtake us on the way...

It's a joy of knowing how much God loves us,
a joy of knowing he has called us and forgiven us
a joy of celebrating how he has changed us and helped us to blossom
a joy of knowing he is working with us and within us to overcome our weaknesses
a joy of knowing we are part of an eternal Kingdom.

God in his mercy refreshes us, strengthens and encourages us
He enables, equips and empowers us to work for him wherever we are
He calls us and leads us on towards his heavenly Kingdom.

- That Kingdom of light and love and peace
Where there will be no suffering, no sorrow, no sighing
Only everlasting Joy.

Hymn StF 255 The kingdom of God is justice and joy
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vavK1736mQM>

The kingdom of God is justice and joy;
For Jesus restores what sin would destroy.
God's power and glory in Jesus we know;
And here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God is mercy and grace;
The captives are freed, the sinners find place,
The outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share;
And hope is awakened in place of despair.

The kingdom of God is challenge and choice:
Believe the good news, repent and rejoice!
God's love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross:
Our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal;
In Jesus begun, in heaven made whole.
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call;
And all things cry "Glory!" to God all in all. (Bryn Rees)

Prayers of intercession

Living God, we bring our prayers to you now for all that concerns us.

Hear our prayer, O God, as we hold before you our concerns for the Church:
For Christians whose church buildings have been attacked or destroyed
for Christians persecuted and imprisoned for their faith;
for Christians seeking renewal of their faith;
for all those who are seeking purpose in life;
May we your people be faithful in proclaiming the gospel;
May we be steadfast in our witness and generous in showing your love
Silence

Hear our prayer, O God, as we hold before you our concerns for the world:
for those who are hungry and thirsty;
for those who endure homelessness, poverty and unemployment;
for those who are stifled by injustice and abuse;
for those who have it all, and yet still feel empty;
for the powerful and the abuser. *Silence*

Hear our prayer, O God, as we hold before you our concerns for our community:
for good and right relations between people of different faiths, traditions and creeds;
for those who serve our community's needs – our schools, surgeries, shops and cafes.
for fire-fighters, ambulance crews and police officers;
our hospitals, hospices and hotels;
for those who administer our resources,
for those who administer justice;
for those who in silent and unobtrusive ways do what is right and make us feel better: *Silence*

Hear our prayer, O God, as we hold before you our hopes and dreams,
our fears and uncertainties:
for those we know who are unwell; for the bereaved;
for those suffering in body, mind or spirit;
for all making a new start in life, or with important decisions to make;
for youngsters in new schools, those starting university,
or beginning new jobs,
for all who are growing deeper in their life of faith;
for ourselves and who we are:
Silence

And finally we ask,
That we may be part of God's answer to the prayers we have made
for we pray in the name of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit
Amen.

Hymn StF 713 Show me how to stand for justice

<https://youtu.be/jrMuTxZDGLI>

Show me how to stand for justice:
how to work for what is right,
how to challenge false assumptions,
how to walk within the light.
May I learn to share more freely
in a world so full of greed,

showing your immense compassion
by the life I choose to lead.

Teach my heart to treasure mercy,
whether given or received –
for my need has not diminished
since the day I first believed:
let me seek no satisfaction
boasting of what I have done,
but rejoice that I am pardoned
and accepted in your Son.

Gladly I embrace a lifestyle
modelled on your living word,
in humility submitting
to the truth which I have heard.
Make me conscious of your presence
every day, in all I do:
by your Spirit's gracious prompting
may I learn to walk with you.

(Martin Leckebusch)

Blessing

Gracious God, we resolve to retake our place in the world
We offer our hands to do your work;
we offer our hearts to pray for your world;
we offer our gifts to be used in your service;
we offer our lives to be changed by your Spirit.
And may the blessing of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
Be with us all this day and for evermore.
Amen.