

Written Service Sunday October 15th
A service of worship for use at home
Prepared by Rev'd Peter Powers

Charity number 1134226

Prisons Week

Welcome & call to worship

Wherever you are. Whoever you are. Welcome to worship with us here in the Nottingham North East Circuit of the Methodist Church.

Some opening words from Psalm 142

"I cry to you, O LORD; I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living." Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me. Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name."

Hymn: O for a thousand tongues to sing.

O for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and King,
the triumphs of his grace!

2 My gracious Master and my God,
assist me to proclaim,
to spread thro' all the earth abroad
the honors of your name.

3 Jesus! the name that charms our
fears,
that bids our sorrows cease,
'tis music in the sinner's ears,
'tis life and health and peace.

4 He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
he sets the prisoner free;
his blood can make the foulest clean;
his blood availed for me.

5 To God all glory, praise, and love
be now and ever given
by saints below and saints above,
the Church in earth and heaven.

This is the end of Prisons Week in the UK and so our service offers some reflections, prayers and hymns on this theme.

Opening prayers

Open the eyes of our hearts Lord, to see things from your perspective; Let us find our strength in you as we walk into your plans;
Give us courage to go wherever you call us.

May our worship honour you on earth and in heaven. May our lives serve you in the world.

Heavenly Father, help us to know how to best serve You and to bless those we meet in Your name; Help us to reflect your love and kindness in all that we do.

God of peace, we pray for your supernatural peace in prisons where there is unrest and uncertainty. Equip those on the front line with your armour and protection.

God of mercy, give all prisoners a deep desire to live out Jesus' peace within them. May they find transformation through your restorative justice. God who loves us as a Father and Mother, strengthen and protect the relationship between parents in prison and their children; surround

their children with your love and care, and support them both through that traumatic separation.

God of love, we give thanks for those who volunteer for ministries in prisons; Bless them in their lives, and in all they do: Protect them as they go into challenging environments; give them energy, wisdom and grace in all they do, and continue to draw more believers into your work in prisons.

God of heaven, give churches a vision for your Kingdom that includes serving those in prison, and a passion to reach out to prisoners and their families with Christ's love and compassion.

God of grace, we pray for wisdom and clarity in our lives. Inspire us in all we say and do for you. Give us a fresh vision of lives changed and communities healed.

God of hope, enable us to see all those we meet through your eyes, and to have your heart for them. Give us your words and peace as we interact with them and grace to walk alongside them.

Amen.

Reading: Jeremiah 29.10-14

For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Hymn: The kingdom of God is justice and joy

1 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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 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.

Reading: Ephesians 2.1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Reading: Luke 7.36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Hymn: The Servant Song (Brother, Sister, let me serve you)

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| 1. Brother, sister, let me serve you;
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too. | 4. I will! weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow,
till we've seen this journey through. |
| 2. We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load. | 5. When we sing to God in heaven,
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony. |
| 3. I will hold the Christ light for you
in the nighttime of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear. | 6. Brother, sister, let me serve you;
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too. |

Sermon

Some of you may have heard that I have come to serve at Arnold Church from my previous appointment in Oxford? That city played an important part in the story of the Methodist Church and in the lives of the founders John and Charles Wesley.

When in Oxford as a student John Wesley recalls in his journal often visiting the prisoners at Oxford Castle, he preached there once a month. The castle is now a luxury hotel. How things change! In John Wesley's day it was a prison. During that time the prison was visited daily by members of the Holy Club which John, Charles and others founded alongside their studies.

One of those founding members was a young man called William Morgan. He had a deep concern for the plight of those in need. It was natural for him to encourage his student friends to join him in visiting prisoners and helping the poor in Oxford.

William Morgan was the son of an Irish gentleman. He was a Commoner of Christ Church, Oxford. Which simply means he wasn't from the gentry and had a place at Oxford paid for by an endowment. He was there at the same time as the Wesleys. From his childhood, William, was known to be warm-hearted and charitably minded. In later years, John Wesley recalled that he and his brother Charles first went with Morgan to visit prisoners in the Castle in the August of 1730. Most of those in prison had fallen into debt. Morgan had been doing what he could to help them get financial assistance. He helped others in need too and paid for needy children to go to school. Impressed by Morgan's work, John Wesley began to consult on a plan for the group to begin a more systematic programme of social assistance. Samuel Wesley approved. The wider Wesley family developed both a fondness and respect for Morgan, who became part of their close circle of friends.

With the prison population in many parts of the world on the increase (the number of people in Britain's jails, for example, is at an all-time high), the church's ministry to prisoners and the prison system has never been more vital.

Methodists, of course, should know that the Gospel imperative to visit those in prison was picked up very strongly by John Wesley and the early movement that he started. And he didn't limit his work to visitations, either. The appalling conditions of the prison system were a cause of great concern to Wesley, who was an inspiration to the movement for prison reform in the late 18th century.

The great campaigner for prison reform, John Howard, drew spiritual strength from Wesley, and statues of both men can be seen together in London's St Paul's Cathedral. John Howard once told a group of Wesley's preachers about the challenge and lasting inspiration he had derived from a sermon by Wesley on the text, "Whatever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might."

Wesley's admiration for Howard was equally keen. Following an extended conversation with him in 1787, he expressed the belief that the heroic prison reformer was surely "one of the greatest men in Europe."

Wesley himself was a constant friend of prisoners. He considered the infamous Newgate Prison in London (where the Old Bailey courts of justice now stand) to be the nearest possible earthly approach to hell. Wesley once raised money to procure clothing and blankets for French prisoners of the Seven Years War detained in English jails, and he encouraged all his preachers -- when they were permitted to do so by the authorities -- to visit and to minister to the needs of prisoners. His brother, Charles, is also said to have spent a great deal of effort in prison visiting. Just how familiar John Wesley was with the prisons of his day can be gauged from the fact that in a period of nine months he preached at least 67 times in various jails -- institutions that he had been known to describe as nurseries of "all manner of wickedness." Indeed, it was because of Wesley's often fearless criticism of prison conditions that he was sometimes banned from

visiting inmates there. This led him to make the caustic remark in his journal that he was "forbidden to go to Newgate for fear of making them wicked, and to Bedlam for fear of driving them mad!"

In 1759, Wesley walked to Knowle, near Bristol, to see a company of French prisoners of the Seven Years War. His report was revealing. "About 1,100 of them, we are informed, were confined in that little place, without anything to lie on but a little dirty straw, or anything to cover them but a few foul, thin rags, either by day or night ...," he said. "I was much affected and preached in the evening on 'Thou shalt not oppress a stranger; for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.' (Exodus 23.9)"

He then set about raising money with which to buy linen and wool cloth to make into clothes. These were distributed to the prisoners in greatest need. Later, the city's governing body sent a large quantity of mattresses and blankets, and it wasn't long before contributions flowed in from other parts of Britain as well.

In early 1761, Wesley wrote a letter to a newspaper commending the transformation that had apparently occurred in Bristol's Newgate Prison. That prison, he observed, was now "clean and sweet," there was no fighting or brawling, contending parties were heard face to face before the keeper, no drunkenness was suffered, and women prisoners were kept separate from the men. Furthermore, industry was encouraged by the free provision of tools and materials and by the payment to prisoners of a "moderate profit" on all articles made. A public service was provided every Sunday, and a sermon was also preached every Thursday. Free medical treatment was given to the sick, and "a large Bible was chained on one side of the chapel, which any of the prisoners may read." So remarkable was the transformation from the "filth, the stench, the misery and wickedness" of previous days that Wesley declared the prison to be wearing a "new face." He called for the blessing of God and man upon its remarkable keeper and his amazing achievement. Although Wesley does not mention the fact, the Bristol Newgate prison was run by a Mr. Dagge, an early convert of the evangelical revival. But how different was this keeper's prison from those up and down the country! "Meanwhile, will no one follows his example?" asked Wesley in his final sentence. In the opening sentence, he had protested that of all the "seats of woe on this side of hell," few equaled Newgate prison.

For decades, in the early 18th century, there was little public conscience to support reform of the prisons, which were ridden with gross cruelty, graft and corruption inflicted upon people -- many of them debtors -- whose crimes would seem petty by today's standards. It wasn't until Wesley began to awaken the soul of England and until Howard gave his life to prison reform, that progress occurred.

At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, prison reform is still not the most popular cause across the world. The inhumane system that existed in Wesley's time has been swept away, and today there is growing support for the victims of crime. However, in some countries, prisoners are still held in appalling conditions, and we are rightly concerned about prisoners of conscience and those being held as hostages.

Many of our Methodist prison chaplains would argue that prison reform is still needed, even in our so-called civilised societies. In this they can draw inspiration from the founder of Methodism, John Wesley.

The Good News is just this 'Your sins are forgiven'. Not that they will be forgiven but that they are. It simply requires a step of faith into this astonishing world where punishment does not inevitably follow sin, nor vengeance follow an offence or where grace does not follow reparation - but precedes it. The mercy and grace of Jesus were the means by which they knew themselves to be sinners; but more precisely, forgiven sinners. The love of God is always generous if not extravagant, and can evoke radical changes in the hearts and minds of all so that as the hymn-

writer says; ' the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives'.

A few weeks ago, The Archbishop of York, told a story that had come out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A woman addressed Desmond Tutu to tell him of her son's savage murder. The police officer who had ordered the brutal killing was present sitting shamefacedly listening to the details of what he and his colleagues had done. Then there were a few moments of quiet. The Chair of the Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, asked the woman if she had anything to say to the man who had killed her son. She responded, 'I am very full of sorrow. So I am asking you now - come with me to the place where he died, pick up in your hands some of the dust of the place where his body lay, and feel in your world what it is to have lost so much. And then I will ask you one thing more. When you have felt my sadness, I want you to do this. I have so much love, and without my son, that love has nowhere to go. On turning to the policeman she said, 'So I am asking you from now on - you be my son, and I will love you in his place.' Her action illustrates the extravagance of the Gospel. The Church at its best introduces a new dimension as it stands alongside victim and perpetrator. Restorative Justice from a Christian perspective recognises that the dividing line between good and evil cuts through every human being; that we are all sinners in need of grace. The emerging Church is learning new ways of doing justice by building communities where acceptance and reconciliation become second nature and ' Shalom' is restored.

AMEN

Prayers of intercession:

Lord, you offer freedom to all people. We pray for those in prison.

Break the bonds of fear and isolation that exist.

Support with your love prisoners and their families and friends, prison staff and all who care.

Heal those who have been wounded by the activities of others, especially the victims of crime.

Help us to forgive one another.

To act justly, love mercy and walk humbly together with Christ in His strength and in His Spirit, now and every day.

God of all, Christ in all. We pray for our ever-changing world. That your continued flow of light and love, would bring healing and restoration. As we continue to navigate the changes to our society, due to pandemics, politics, and personal challenges.

We particularly pray for those whose lives have been formed around prison life and are reintegrating into the outside world.

As they come to terms with new levels of freedom, we pray for wisdom and discernment, to continue their journey of transformation.

As they come to terms with new responsibilities, we pray for the right support around them.

Bless those in our world dealing with seismic changes,

May we better see the world of the other and show grace and compassion to the stories around us.

Be with us now as together we pray the prayer Jesus taught us.

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: Come let us sing of a wonderful love

Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,
tender and true,
out of the heart of the Father above,
streaming to me and to you:
wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

2 Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,
joyfully came,
came with the helpless and hopeless to
dwell,
sharing their sorrow and shame;
seeking the lost,
saving, redeeming at measureless cost.

3 Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;
why do they roam,
Love only waits to forgive and forget;
home, weary wanderers, home!
Wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

4 Come to my heart, O thou wonderful
Love,
come and abide,
lifting my life till it rises above
envy and falsehood and pride;
seeking to be
lowly and humble, a learner of thee.

Blessing:

May the Spirit of Jesus go with you this week in all you say and do.
And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Spirit be yours today and always.

AMEN