

Sunday 20th March 2022
At Home Service
Prepared by Ian Wood

Nottingham North East
Methodist Circuit

WWW.NNEMETHODIST.ORG.UK

Charity number 1134226



Call To Worship

Mighty God, you are our God,
We are thirsty for you.
Like travellers in the desert looking for water but finding only sand.
We trust you because we know something of your great power and glory.
Your never-failing love surrounds us.
So, we want to praise you with our words
And make our whole life a celebration.
Help us to truly worship you.

Amen

Hymn StF 64 Praise is rising <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBUBj47UsTw>

Praise is rising, eyes are turning to You
We turn to You
Hope is stirring, hearts are yearning for You
We long for You
When we see You
We find strength to face the day
In Your presence all our fears
Are washed away, washed away

Hosanna, Hosanna
You are the God who saves us
Worthy of all our praises
Hosanna, Hosanna
Come have Your way among us
We welcome You here, Lord Jesus
Hear the sound of hearts returning to You
We turn to You
In Your kingdom broken lives are made new
You make all things new

Songwriters: Baloché Paul Joseph / Brown Brenton Gifford

Prayer

We come before the loving God.
We bring our pain and suffering, and the pain and suffering of our world
– and we pray for healing.
We bring all the burdens we carry, and the burdens of our world
– and we ask for strength.
We bring grief and sadness, and the grief and sadness of our world
– and hope to find comfort.
God says: Come to me, and pay close attention;
listen carefully so that you may live.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Confession

Life-giving, forgiving God,
your Son Jesus challenged people to repent and turn again to follow you.
That challenge, O God, is still relevant for us and for all people.
So at this time we bow before you to confess again our need of your forgiveness
and your renewing power in our lives.
Loving, gracious God,
we are sorry for wandering from your ways,
for the times we forget you,
for the times we ignore your call to live as your people,

for failing to share our knowledge and love for you with those around us.
We admit that we need to change, and we cannot do that without your forgiveness,
and your renewing Spirit in our lives.
Lord God, hear our prayer.

To all who truly repent,
God says: 'Your sins are forgiven,
I will remember them no more.'

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Hymn StF 429 Lord we turn to you for mercy https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VP12CN_3pCs

1 Lord, we turn to you for mercy:
may our prayerful words express
something of our heartfelt sorrow
for the sins we now confess.

2 We have trusted far too often
in our human strength and skill;
we have proudly disregarded
what we know to be your will.

3 Yet by your immense compassion
you invite, accept, restore,
leading us to greater wholeness
than we ever knew before.

4 Your forgiveness lifts our burdens,
setting heart and spirit free
to fulfil our true potential,
all that we were meant to be.

5 For you teach a way of wisdom
we may clearly understand:
walking with the God of mercy
step by step, and hand in hand.

Scripture Reading Isaiah 55: 1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not
bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

3 Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.

5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.

6 Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;

7 let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on
them,

and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Scripture Reading Luke 13: 1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

6 Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" 8 He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."'

Hymn StF 248 I heard the voice of Jesus say <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRgNaUCq39w>

1 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Come unto Me, and rest;
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down
Thy head upon My breast."
I came to Jesus as I was,
Weary, and worn, and sad;
I found in Him a resting-place,
And He has made me glad.

3 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"I am this dark world's Light;
Look unto Me, thy morn shall rise,
And all thy day be bright."
I looked to Jesus, and I found
In Him my Star, my Sun;
And in that Light of life I'll walk
Till trav'ling days are done.

2 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Behold, I freely give
The living water: thirsty one,
Stoop down, and drink, and live."
I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in Him.

Sermon

A Woman goes to church after not going for many years. Met a sour faced lady who declared : "God is angry at all the sin in the world, we all deserve to be punished. No matter how good you are, or how loving you try to be, you cannot reach God's standards, He will always be disappointed in you."

She didn't go back there again

Do you believe in an angry God of vengeance who wants to punish us? Some people do.

I can recall some loud voices over the years from some (mainly American) preachers stating that disasters and catastrophes, whether natural or the result of terrorism are God's judgement on mankind . Whether it's a school shooting in USA, mass murders in a mosque, a bomb at a crowded UK arena, or Tsunamis, floods, earthquakes , or epidemics - they are all sent as punishment by God because of relaxed moral standards. Those who promote such views usually have their own lists of things that

they think God wants to punish: Acceptance and inclusion of the LGBT community, or teaching evolution and science instead of a literal 6 day creation, or allowing women to have an abortion. You can probably think of others.

In society in general when something bad happens, often the cry goes up “What have I done to deserve this” which perhaps suggests an underlying belief that this is how God works, and that God is punishing them.

That mindset is present in our Gospel reading. Luke’s story tells us that Jesus has decided to go to Jerusalem with a group of fellow Galilean pilgrims when they share some hot news. They inform Jesus of an atrocity committed by Pilate who slaughtered some other Galileans while they were offering sacrifice in the Temple.

It was a tragic event. It was bad enough to live under the occupation of Pilate and his reign of terror but here he sent Roman soldiers into the Temple and had pilgrims killed alongside of their sacrifices so that the blood of the innocent mingled with the blood of the sacrifice on the floor of the Temple courtyard. It was a sacrilegious act.

Some of the Galilean pilgrims shared this news with Jesus, their report tainted with self-righteous anger. Perhaps they expected him to condemn the outrage . Or perhaps say God was punishing them. For the people of the time, one of the key ideas growing out of their experience and theology was that suffering and sin were connected. The relationship was a simple formula: Obedience to the Torah brought blessings. Disobedience brought a curse. Simply a matter of cause and effect.

Jesus responds not by condemning Pilate nor by suggesting that the pilgrims were being punished.

He simply asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? This is clearly a denial of any suggestion that God had punished them

Then a second example is raised by Jesus and it is parallel to the first: the fall of a tower in Siloam killing 18 Galileans. Jesus’ response follows the same line of questioning: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?

I can imagine that those who shared the news are listening for his response, wanting Jesus to confirm that yes, indeed, those people were worse sinners and that was why they died. Perhaps they were also thinking to themselves “because we are not sinners like those people were then we will be saved.”

Jesus didn’t say any of that. Jesus responds to these rhetorical questions with a challenge: No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.

Repent – means to turn about and walk in the opposite direction. The word is translated from the Greek word “Metanoia” which means a change of Mind, a change in the trend and action of the whole inner nature, one’s intellect, affections and morals. A complete and total change of heart, soul and mind.

Then he illustrates his meaning with a parable of a man who found himself stuck with an unproductive fig tree. Soil was at a premium in Israel. It was not unusual for a vineyard owner to give a little bit of his soil up for a fruit tree, but this tree took up the best soil, the deepest soil, and required the most water. A fig tree doesn’t grow fruit until three years after planting. The owner in this story, had

given the tree "due season" to bear fruit and yet the tree still bore no fruit. It took up valuable space and resources.

Normally, he would have cut it down but the owner agrees to allow it to stand for one more year. It will even receive special care. It has a second chance to become fruitful. But if it doesn't, at the end of that time, if it has not produced fruit, it will be chopped down.

Now, we often tend to read this parable as an allegory, assuming that the landowner is God, the gardener is Jesus, and we are the failing fig tree.

But nowhere else in Luke do we find a picture of an angry, vindictive God that needs to be placated by a friendly Jesus.

Rather, Jesus portrays God as a father who scans the horizon day in and day out waiting for his wayward son to come home and as a woman who after sweeping her house all night looking for a lost coin throws a party costing even more than the coin is worth to celebrate that she found it.

Luke's Gospel overflows with the conviction that "there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

Given Luke's consistent picture of God's reaction to sin, we need an alternative understanding: perhaps the impatient landowner represents us and *our own* sense of how the world *should* work. Are we ready to give up, throw in the towel, because we cannot see the world getting any better? , and wondering what the point is? From a very early age, we want things to be "fair". We perhaps think we should receive rewards for doing good and demand that punishment is meted out for those who do evil.

(Of course, we are not always consistent, for when it comes to our own mistakes and misdeeds – then we want mercy!)

So perhaps the key to understanding the parable is to see that it paints a picture of a patient gardener who is God. And we then see that God consistently challenges our notions of fairness and dares to reveal that the ultimate answer to sin isn't punishment – not even in the name of justice – but rather mercy, reconciliation, and new life.

God is not a God of punishment, but a God of second chances

This whole discussion takes place on the road to Jerusalem, as Jesus is making his way steadfastly to the cross. And as we reflect on this passage in the light of the whole of Luke's Gospel, we might come to recognize that the cross is not about punishment for sin either. Not for Jesus' sin, certainly, but also not for ours. There is popular and widespread interpretation of the cross: that because God is just, God has to punish sin, and because God is loving, God punishes Jesus instead of us.

But such an understanding of the cross says more about our inadequate understanding of justice than it says about God.

In contrast to this theory, I would want to uphold the view that the cross is not about punishment but is instead about identification, solidarity, and love.

Rather than hold to a theology that God has to punish someone – and that we're just lucky Jesus was around – what if instead we recognize that God's answer to sin isn't punishment at all but instead is love.

That is, in Jesus, God loves us enough to take on our humanity and our lives fully, identifying with us completely. In the crucifixion, we see just how far God is willing to go to be with us and for us, even to the point of suffering unjustly and dying the death of a criminal. And in the resurrection, we see that God's solidarity and love is stronger than anything, even death.

So, how do we respond in the face of suffering and loss? What have we learned about disasters and catastrophes? Has God inflicted them upon us as punishment for our wrongdoing? NO!

We learn that God is with us. That God understands what our suffering is like. That God has promised to redeem all things, including even our suffering. That suffering and injustice do not have the last word in our lives and world. And that God will keep waiting for us and keep urging us to turn away from our self-destructive habits to be drawn again into his loving embrace.

Of course there is a challenge in the parable (as always). The call is to Repentance, A complete and total change of heart, soul and mind.

When John the Baptist spoke of repentance, he told the Jews to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Repentance should show results.

The fig tree was not fulfilling its purpose of bearing fruit. Fig tree was using up valuable soil but not producing fruit. As we might say today, "a waste of space"

This is a Challenge to churches that are not growing the fruit God expects. Are some of our churches a waste of space?

It's a Challenge to individuals who plod along not doing anything for the Kingdom. Are we a waste of space?

Isaiah 55 asks : Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy?

Let's pause for Reflection

Are we honest about the radical transformation required by the Gospel?

Are we honest about repentance - the complete change of mind, hearts and actions in order to follow Christ ?

The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Are we spending our time and energy on things that don't produce the fruit that God wants?

Meditation

There is a sound, God,
when grief spills from the corner of an eye,
and stains the earth with its wetness.
It is not a quiet sound,
although it may be difficult to hear,
and it is not a strange sound;
we know its compelling rhythms all too well,
because it is, after all, the sound of your voice.

You fill every tear with your nail-scarred presence,

and breathe into every gasp,
your comforting Spirit.
And in every broken voice, you call,
inviting us to find you
in the weeping.

Thank you for the grace that shouts
in the pain of our world,
and that teaches us to listen for life
in the sound of tears.

Intercessions

Loving Lord,
in the days when you walked as a man upon earth
life was hard and people suffered.

Your land was occupied,
peace was just a dream.

You knew about trouble.

So, Lord, we bring our troubled world to you now.

You are the Lord of all, the gardener of creation.

Teach the world's leaders how they best may tend
the trees of healing and righteousness.

Creator God, great gardener of earth and heaven,

restore your creation to wholeness.

We have made our world a garden of damaged trees and bitter fruit.

Lord, we pray for those places where there is hurt, anger and war,

for lands where children have never known peace,

for peoples brutalised by suffering.

Creator God, great gardener of earth and heaven,

restore your creation to wholeness.

Lord, we pray for all those who suffer pain and persecution,

especially those who suffer at the hands of others.

We pray too for those who have grown so far away from knowing you
that they cause hurt, or carry out persecution.

Creator God, great gardener of earth and heaven,

restore your creation to wholeness.

We pray for those who are dying or recently bereaved:

may they know you are with them on their journey.

Comfort all those who are frightened or lonely:

may their sadness give way to joy as they feel the warmth of your love.

Creator God, great gardener of earth and heaven,

restore your creation to wholeness.

God of all things, we pray for the ravaged earth.

We ask your forgiveness for our carelessness with your gifts.

We ask you to show us how to be better gardeners, better stewards,

better custodians of the world around us.

Creator God, great gardener of earth and heaven,

restore your creation to wholeness.

Finally a prayer for peace

Loving God, we pray for peace for Ukraine and Russia. For hope and healing and peace. For wisdom for leaders around the world and a will and desire for peace. For a de-escalation of the conflict. That nuclear weapons will not be used. Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.

Amen.

Hymn StF 706 Longing for Light <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kt3Qc04ulOM>

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.

Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.

Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us your living voice.

Christ, be our light!

Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed.
Christ, be our light!

Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
walls made of living stone.

Christ, be our light!

Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your kingdom come.
Christ, be our light!

A 'sending out' prayer

Go in the love of God:
offer God's generosity to all you meet;
be generous to others as God is generous to you.
May God the Father bless us.
May God the Son be deep within us.
May God the Holy Spirit guide us and give us life.
Amen.