

Written Service May 7th 2023
A service of worship for use at home
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Call to worship

Father God, you are our rock and our fortress:
Jesus, you are our Way, our Truth and our Life:
Spirit of God, you are our inspiration and our comforter:

Lead us and guide us.
Lead us and guide us.
Lead and guide us in worship.

Hymn StF 327 Jesus is King and I will extol him

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRfAD7gQPoo>

Jesus is King and I will extol him, Give him the glory, and honour his name
He reigns on high, enthroned in the heavens, Word of the Father, exalted for us,
We have a hope that is steadfast and certain, Gone through the curtain and touching the throne
We have a priest who is there interceding, Pouring his grace on our lives day by day
We come to him, our priest and apostle, Clothed in his glory and bearing his name
Laying our lives with gladness before him Filled with his spirit we worship the King
Oh holy one, our hearts do adore you, Thrilled with your goodness we give you our praise
Angels in light with worship surround him, Jesus, our Saviour, forever the same

A gathering prayer

Father God, you know us better than we know ourselves; yet you still love us.
Lord Jesus, help us to become more like you, so that others will see you in us.
Spirit of the living God fall on us afresh today and remake us in God's image.
Amen.

A prayer of adoration

Blessed God, we cannot see and know the depth of your being,
but, for what we do see and know, we worship and adore you.
We find in you protection, guidance and love.
We find in you forgiveness, acceptance and repentance.
We see in you a way of living that is right and just, loving and caring.
We feel the spark of your Spirit in the depths of our beings and know you to be true.
You search us and know us and are forever with us.
Blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as you are one,
may we be one with you and all creation.
Amen.

A prayer of confession

Merciful God,
by your calling we are made holy,
yet we know that we do not live up to this holy calling.
Forgive us our harsh words and thoughtless acts.
Forgive us our forgetfulness and pride.
Forgive us our short-sightedness and failure to act.
Forgive us and have mercy on us.

> silence when we can confess our shortcomings in the past week.

Here are words we can trust:

Christ Jesus came and lived among us,
revealing the truth of God's love and grace.
Those who had no hope, he called by name.
To those who had lost their way he said 'Follow me';
To us, who wait on God's mercy, he says: 'You are forgiven'.
Let us learn to forgive ourselves and one another
that we might live the gift of God's grace!

Amen.

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 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)

Acts 7 v 54 – 8 v 3: Good News Translation

⁵⁴ As the members of the Council listened to Stephen, they became furious and ground their teeth at him in anger. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw God's glory and Jesus standing at the right side of God. ⁵⁶ "Look!" he said. "I see heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right side of God!"

⁵⁷ With a loud cry the Council members covered their ears with their hands. Then they all rushed at him at once, ⁵⁸ threw him out of the city, and stoned him. The witnesses left their cloaks in the care of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ They kept on stoning Stephen as he called out to the Lord, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰ He knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord! Do not remember this sin against them!" He said this and died. And Saul approved of his murder.

That very day the church in Jerusalem began to suffer cruel persecution. All the believers, except the apostles, were scattered throughout the provinces of Judea and Samaria. ² Some devout men buried Stephen, mourning for him with loud cries.

³ But Saul tried to destroy the church; going from house to house, he dragged out the believers, both men and women, and threw them into jail.

1 Peter 2:2-10 Good News Translation

² Be like newborn babies, always thirsty for the pure spiritual milk, so that by drinking it you may grow up and be saved. ³ As the scripture says, "You have found out for yourselves how kind the Lord is."

⁴ Come to the Lord, the living stone rejected by people as worthless but chosen by God as valuable.

⁵ Come as living stones, and let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple, where you will serve as holy priests to offer spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For the scripture says,

"I chose a valuable stone, which I am placing as the cornerstone in Zion;
and whoever believes in him will never be disappointed."

⁷ This stone is of great value for you that believe; but for those who do not believe:

"The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all."

⁸ And another scripture says,

"This is the stone that will make people stumble, the rock that will make them fall."

They stumbled because they did not believe in the word; such was God's will for them.

⁹ But you are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvellous light.

¹⁰ At one time you were not God's people, but now you are his people; at one time you did not know God's mercy, but now you have received his mercy.

StF 79 I'll Praise my maker while I've breath https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7ETSIsB_q0

I'll praise my Maker while I've breath, And when my voice is lost in death,
Praise shall employ my nobler pow'rs;
My days of praise shall ne'er be past, While life and thought and being last,
Or immortality endures.

How happy they whose hopes rely On Israel's God, Who made the sky
And earth and seas with all their train:
His truth forever stands secure; He saves th' oppressed, He feeds the poor,
And none shall find His promise vain.

The Lord gives eyesight to the blind; The Lord supports the sinking mind;
He sends the lab'ring conscience peace;
He helps the stranger in distress, The widow, and the fatherless,
And grants the pris'ner sweet release.

I'll praise Him while He lends me breath, And when my voice is lost in death,
Praise shall employ my nobler pow'rs;
My days of praise shall ne'er be past, While life and thought and being last,
Or immortality endures.

SERMON :

In the set lessons today, I was struck by the contrasts in the writings:
In the story of Stephen's martyrdom stones were used to kill him. In Peter's letter he describes us as living stones and Jesus as the cornerstone.

So my first thought was that stones can be used destructively to kill and harm or more positively to build up and make strong.

But the other contrast is between Stephen who wanted to share the gospel with his community, and build up the new believers, and was prepared to die for his faith, and Saul whose only interest at the time was to try to destroy the Christian Church and obliterate it completely.

We know only too well the challenging passages of scripture about taking up our cross and following Jesus and most of us would like to think that if we had to put our life on the line for the sake of the gospel, we would do so.

And it is not hard for us to promise to serve Jesus to the end, and stand firm and faithful – because we live in a society where we are not persecuted. We are free to meet together whenever we want to, and we can worship without fear of being arrested, tortured or imprisoned for our faith.

We may be ignored or considered irrelevant, but none of us generally have to face hostile opposition.

Acts tells us the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

Stephen emerges in the early chapters of the Book of Acts at a time of great tension in the church at Jerusalem. There was great tension at this time between Christian converts who had come from orthodox Judaism and other Christians who had come from cultures with more liberal attitudes and customs. There had been complaints raised by one group of converts against another.

To understand the background : The Greek speaking Jews (Hellenists) had been scattered around the Mediterranean world, but for various reasons had now returned to live in Jerusalem.

The Hellenists had adopted some Greek ways, often gave their children Greek names, and dressed in a more contemporary Greek or Roman style, and not as was customary in the more established Jewish tradition. They had their own synagogue in Jerusalem. Their worship was conducted in Greek, and they called their synagogue the "Synagogue of Freedmen" which was provocative towards the locals.

The local Jews, especially those in Judea, had been born and bred in their holy land, considered themselves to be the authentic children of Abraham...and strongly disapproved of the more permissive worshippers at the Greek Synagogue.

They used only Hebrew when they worshipped in their synagogues and temple. Their everyday language was common Aramaic, and they stuck rigidly to the old customs of dress and life style.

These locals looked down on the Hellenists. The conservative Judeans in Jerusalem saw the Hellenists as wishy-washy, cross-cultural, second grade unauthentic Hebrews, and were not afraid to say so.

But as Christianity had spread in and around Jerusalem, converts had come from both groups - there were new Christians who had been local, conservative Jews and others who had been more liberal Hellenists.

Unfortunately the old enmities that were commonplace when they had been Jews, and their old attitudes seem to have carried over into the new community of Christian faith. Converts from conservative Judaism, may have been less than generous to the ex-Hellenists. In particular the Greek speakers were most unhappy and complained that in the daily distribution of food to the needy members of the Christian community, they were being ignored, and resources targeted at the born and bred locals.

So the Apostles responded quickly and decisively and with great wisdom. They called a meeting of the followers of Christ and asked them to select suitable persons to take care of social welfare matters, so they could carry on with their primary task of preaching and making new converts.

Five men were elected, and with prayer and the laying on of hands, these were ordained as deacons.

Among them was Stephen, a man "full of grace and wisdom." It is no coincidence that Stephen is a Greek name. The other four deacons also had Greek names. The young church was trying its best to put right any discriminatory wrongs that may have been done to the Greek speaking Christians.

The brief story of Stephen is recounted by Luke in the Book of Acts. He was evidently a fluent preacher. He is described as a most outspoken orator in preaching the gospel of the risen Christ Jesus – so much so that it really got up the noses of his old associates at the Synagogue of Freedmen.

It was bad enough that he had converted; defected to the rebel Christian sect. But those heretics had now appointed Stephen to a respected office. The fact that he was so eloquent in speaking out against his former brothers increased their anger.

These Greek speaking Jews were so incensed they looked past their sour relationships with the conservative Jews and went off to the temple authorities and laid formal complaints. They claimed that Stephen was slandering the holy Jewish faith and brought him before the Jewish ecclesiastical high court for judgement.

Stephen was not overwhelmed by the situation. He gave an eloquent address to the court, praising the glories of the past great leaders of Israel, but reminding them that their forefathers had in fact persecuted the prophets.

He hit a raw nerve when he exclaimed:

"You are a stiff-necked people, unconverted in your ears and heart, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Were there any prophets at all who your ancestors did not persecute? They killed those who proclaimed in advance the coming of the Righteous Leader [Jesus] whom you have betrayed and murdered".

This did not exactly go down well with the high court. Stephen was hauled out of the city and stoned to death. And as he was dying he echoed the dying words of his Lord: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

His last words were merciful, like that of Jesus on the cross.

"Lord Jesus, do not hold this sin against them."

Stephen was a remarkable young man – prepared to stand up and be counted – prepared to see things through to the end. This Hellenist Christian, young in the faith, had grasped the enormity of the gospel – and he had been transformed by the Spirit of Jesus. If practising what we preach, is the test of authentic faith, then the man we know as the first Christian martyr, Stephen, passed that test with flying colours.

By contrast, equally fervent in his own faith, Luke tells us of another man, Saul, present at the stoning. He held the cloaks of those who were there and knowing the strong animosity between the conservative Jews and the Hellenists, you can imagine the hatred Saul had for Stephen. For not only had he been one of the Greek speaking liberal upstarts, but he had deserted Judaism and converted to the new Christian religion.

And I wonder if something about the way Stephen died touched the soul of Saul and had an impact on him. Did it somehow have a small part in the transformation that happened a little later, when Saul of Tarsus was transformed into Paul the Apostle?

God can transform lives in ways that seem incredible.

But there is no life that is beyond the reach of that transforming power.

Christ is alive – this is the continuing message of Easter, and like Stephen each of us can play a small part in spreading the gospel, and standing firm in our faith.

The *Chapel of the Twentieth Century Martyrs* can be found in Canterbury Cathedral. It reminds us that men and women still give their lives in order to witness to the glory of God — not because they seek death, but because life is stronger than death, and a love of God and our neighbour is stronger even than a love for our own life.

So let us take heart from the story of Stephen – a young man who stood up for his Saviour, even to the point of giving up his own life.

Let us pray that we may have the strength to stand firm when our face is tested.

A reflective meditation: (from Roots)

Lord, I would be Stephen, speaking out your truth
even as they throw the deadly stones that will take my life.

But I know, I am Saul, self righteous, convinced that my God is the only god,
hardened against anything new or fresh...

anything that challenges my certainty that my faith is my doing
and gives me the authority to silence others; self-made, yet self-deceiving.

Bless me Lord,

as I see Stephen lying in the dust, with a heart so overflowing with your love and grace,
so that I can forgive all who have hurt me, all I have hurt ... and even then forgive myself.

Then might I begin to be remade, as you remade Saul and become as Paul,
to the glory of your name, and with thanks for the witness of all those
who have torn my certainty apart with their humility and sacrifice.

StF 679 Come build the church, not heaps of stone.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeDEZNKibcU&list=PLn-OfD79BfOiM6YOPaK3w29gbFbnuiCK&index=23>

Come, build the Church – not heaps of stone in safe, immobile, measured walls,
but friends of Jesus, Spirit-blown, and fit to travel where he calls.

Come, occupy with glad dissent where death and evil fence the ground,
and pitch a Resurrection-Tent where peace is lived, and love is found.

Exposed upon the open ground to screams of war in East and West,
our ears will catch a deeper sound: the weeping of the world's oppressed.

In wearied face, or frightened child, in all they know, and need to say,
the living Christ shall stand revealed. Come, let us follow and obey

Intercessions following the Coronation of King Charles III

Almighty God, you reign over all things in wisdom, power, and love.
Hear our prayers which we offer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
For Charles our King, that you may pour upon him abundant gifts
to help him fulfil the promises made at his coronation:
Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

That he will have the grace, wisdom, and strength
to live a life of service to you and to his people:
For the Royal Family; that they may love and support the King as he bears the burden of his office:
Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

For the building up of the Church, for the building up of all Christian people,
and for mutual understanding and fellowship between all people of faith:
Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

For this United Kingdom, for His Majesty's other Realms and Territories,
for the whole Commonwealth of Nations,
for their governments and ministers, and for all who are called to public service,
that they will seek justice, mercy, and peace:
Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

For the peace of the world, for the welfare of all people,
for those who care for others and for the environment,
and for all in need: **Fill them with your hope and joy.**

We pray for all who serve our local community.
May they be ambassadors of goodwill, building friendships and cooperation.
Faithful God: **Fill them with your hope and joy.**

We ask your blessing on our homes and families, on our schools, children and young people. May
our neighbourhoods be places of hospitality, peace and trust.
Faithful God: **Fill them with your hope and joy.**

We pray for older people in our community, and especially the isolated and housebound, that they
may be known, honoured and cherished.
Faithful God: **Fill them with your hope and joy.**

We commend to your care the sick and vulnerable, and any who despair.
May the joy of our nation's celebration renew them in heart and mind.
Faithful God: **Fill them with your hope and joy.**

We thank you for your faithfulness: for whether we experience times of joy or sorrow, you continually offer us healing and hope. Transform our lives by your grace, and as you have called us to your service, make us worthy of our calling

Merciful Father, accept these prayers we ask,
for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

StF 677 Christ is made the sure foundation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4kZg0mkPIA>

Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone,
chosen of the Lord, and precious, binding all the Church in one,
holy Zion's help for ever, and her confidence alone.

To this temple, where we call thee, come, O Lord of Hosts, today;
with thy constant loving-kindness hear thy servants as they pray;
and thy fullest benediction shed within its walls always.

Here vouchsafe to all thy servants what they ask of thee to gain,
what they gain from thee for ever with the blessed to retain,
and hereafter in thy glory evermore with thee to reign.

Laud and honour to the Father, laud and honour to the Son,
laud and honour to the Spirit, ever Three, and ever One,
consubstantial, co-eternal, while unending ages run.

Sending out

May God's blessing be with us as we go: a blessing from the one who calls us together;
a blessing from the one who calls us to care; a blessing from the one who never deserts us;
a blessing for all life in all times and all places; a blessing from our gracious God.

Amen.