

Sunday 26th June 2022 –
A service of worship for use at home
Prepared by Ian Wood

Call to Worship

*Give thanks to our loving Lord, call upon his wonderful name;
Tell his story among all nations, tell the world that God is the greatest!*

Hymn - STF 51 Great is thy faithfulness <https://youtu.be/dTKlqmdfHSk>

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my father
There is no shadow of turning with Thee
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they
fail not
As Thou hast been, Thou for ever will be

*Great is thy faithfulness
Great is thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed thy hand hath
provided
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me
Great is thy faithfulness*

Summer and winter, and springtime and
harvest
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To thy great faithfulness, mercy and love
Great is thy faithfulness...

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to
guide
Strength for today and bright hope for
tomorrow
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside
Great is thy faithfulness...

Prayer

When the night is long, when dark is never ending,
when love feels frozen out and times are tough,
let us who wait and watch,
let those who hope and pray, take heart.

Let us look higher and longer.
Let us marvel for a moment at the stars.
Let us consider from our dark place the world of wonders God has made,
God and none other,
and remember all that God has done.

Hold fast to God's promise and sing a new song.
Shout God's praises, rise up with joyful hearts.
For by Christ's coming, life is assured for all who put faith in his word.
Praise be to God
Amen.

Confession and Assurance

My friends, it is good to stop making excuses, and humbly confess our sins to God.
Let us pray.

Loving God, we are glad that you are not put off by human pride and sinfulness. We want to be honest in your presence, and need to receive from your hands either discipline or encouragement according to our individual needs.

Some days we take three steps forward, only to slip one backwards.

*Other days we take one step forward and slip two backwards.
We confess that it is easy to become discouraged,
or to start pretending that our sins do not matter.*

*But deep in our hearts we know they do matter,
and we need the forgiveness and therapy which your word can give us.
Please lift us up from shame or pretence, and make us ready to try again.*

Holy God, Saviour and Friend, we thank you that we are not ignored.
You forgive, cleanse, affirm, strengthen and enliven our hopes.
You lift us up, encourage us to stand straight and dare to believe
in ourselves as your much-loved family.
We praise you for your steadfast love. You are our peace and joy.

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen!*

Absolution

People of God, we do not pray as trembling supplicants who hope to find their judge in a good mood, but as those who know the steadfast grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The mercies of God are new every morning. Shake off any lingering fears or doubts, and trust God entirely, for he loves each one of us without limit.

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 1 Isaiah 65 v17-25 NSRV

¹⁷ For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice for ever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard

in it,
or the cry of distress.
²⁰ No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a
lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be
considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will
be considered accursed.
²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them;

they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
²² They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
²³ They shall not labour in vain, or bear children for calamity;^[a] for they shall be offspring blessed by the

LORD—
and their descendants as well.
²⁴ Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.
²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

Lesson 2 Luke 21 v 5-19

5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6 ‘As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.’

7 They asked him, ‘Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?’ 8 And he said, ‘Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and, “The time is near!” Do not go after them.

9 ‘When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.’ 10 Then he said to them, ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

12 ‘But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. 13 This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; 15 for I will give you words^[c] and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name. 18 But not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Intercessions

Call to prayer

Jesus reminded us that for as long as this world continues, there will be all kinds of disaster and trouble. In his name, let us pray to our Father in heaven for all the people of the world.

Prayers of intercession

We remember those whose lives have been torn apart by wars, by terrorism and inhumanity. We remember Holocaust victims and victims of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Come, Lord God. Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Holy Spirit.

Judge the world with justice and with equity.

We remember those whose lives have been blighted by the carelessness and the apathy of others.

We remember children whose toil makes our treasures, whose deprivation feeds our delight. Come, Lord God. Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Holy Spirit.

Judge the world with justice and with equity.

We remember those who have endured injustice and untruths and malicious slander.
We remember those who have had good things spoiled or taken away for our pleasure.
Come, Lord God. Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Holy Spirit.

Judge the world with justice and with equity.

Lord God, who judges with justice and equity,
we pray for the United Nations and peacemakers everywhere.
We pray for the Red Cross and other charitable organisations,
and all who care for the wounded and weary.
Come, Lord God. Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Holy Spirit.

Judge the world with justice and with equity.

Lord God, who judges with justice and equity,
we pray for ourselves and people of faith everywhere,
that we might be led to make fewer errors of judgement,
and a greater effort to live lives that please you and give a glimpse of your glory.
Come, Lord God. Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Holy Spirit.

Judge the world with justice and with equity.

Concluding prayer

Lord God, you care for us so much that you have promised that not a hair on our heads will perish as we face the trials and tribulations of this world. Give us true faith in you, and trust that you will hear and answer our prayers. We ask this in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

Hymn - StF 255 The Kingdom of God <https://youtu.be/vavK1736mQM>

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.

Sermon

The Lessons today may have been unexpected. They certainly contrast with each other. It is not uncommon for us to hold the expectation that the words of the OT prophets will be a message of condemnation because of our wickedness, and a proclamation of doom and gloom as a consequence. But what Isaiah gives us is a message of Hope.

We also expect that the words of Jesus will be positive and uplifting, not the dire warning he gives in this passage from Luke, and I expect it would have equally been a shock to the disciples listening to him.

So today we are going to look briefly at the context in which the words of each of our lessons were written and see whether that helps us find a relevant message for us today.

I like to joke that Isaiah is three of my favourite prophets, (there were probably 3 different writers contributing to Isaiah over different periods of time). These latter chapters date around 475 BCE, when the Children of Israel had returned after exile in Babylon. They believed the Exile was a punishment because of their rebellion against God's ways, so now they were thankful to be given another chance as they were allowed to return home again.

Their familiar stories, passed down from generation to generation, told of Solomon's glorious temple, and the wonder of the city that was Jerusalem.

But they returned to a scene of devastation, their dreams evaporated when faced with the reality of a city in ruins. If you recall TV footage of warzones in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Ukraine, you will have an idea of what they came home to.

Isaiah walked through a city of rubble: No infrastructure, little commerce, homes in ruins, and the people suffering the after effects of their oppression.

They had been filled with joy at the thought of returning home, but the reality did not match their expectations, as they faced hunger, thirst, illness, early death, grief, sorrow, economic injustice, political turmoil... such was their new reality.

Isaiah gives his people a vision of Hope : A new heaven and a new earth, and Jerusalem recreated to be a delight.

All his pictures of the future are a wonderful contrast to what they were experiencing, and he reminds them that God is a God of renewal and restoration. They can have hope because of who God is and how he cares for his people. Isaiah's optimism is based on a God who is ever faithful.

If we jump forward in time to the gospel reading, we find Jesus outside the temple in Jerusalem. This temple had been constructed by Herod, he hoped as a lasting monument. It was an outstanding array of buildings, (even bigger than Herod's ego). The smallest stones would have weighed 2-3 tons, and the walls stretched up to 400 feet high in places, and the area was vast enough to easily accommodate a quarter of a million people. A contemporary historian, Josephus, wrote of its splendour, and said that at a distance it "looked like a mountain covered with snow, for the parts that were not gilded were exceedingly white."

The disciples marvelled at this structure, but Jesus warned it would not last and would be totally destroyed, not one stone left upon another. They want to know more, asking when and why it would happen. Then follows a discourse about times of suffering, and gives an apocalyptic warning.

We need to remember that Jesus was speaking before the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, whilst Luke's account was written after the event. He has seen the devastation first hand, and just as Isaiah wrote to encourage his people, so Luke is writing to a church still undergoing suffering and persecution.

Perhaps what Luke wrote does not have the same resonance for us, in our relatively comfortable surroundings as it would have done to the fledgling church, trying to maintain their faith in life-threatening circumstances.

Some of the images would be very real to Luke's readers, perhaps they had witnessed first-hand the consequences of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, in AD 79, : a world-wide darkness and colours in the sky as different gasses and dust particles were released into earth's atmosphere. The Christians for whom Luke was writing needed a message of encouragement. Throughout the early years, the church was forged in a furnace of opposition and oppression, yet it had grown and flourished because at its heart was a message of hope, a message of victory over death because of the saving power of Jesus.

Persecution might get worse, Peter and Paul have already been martyred, so Luke writes a gospel to reassure the church about its future.

Many of the things Luke records such as false messiahs, wars, earthquakes, famines, pestilence, and fearful events and amazing signs were the reality of his day. Persecution was already happening. Christians were being betrayed and put to death.

These things were not going to happen at some future event...for the Christians of Luke's day, they were happening now!

And Luke records a promise of Jesus to sustain them in this difficult time, and that through his spirit he will give them words to say when they need them, and that through it all they will not be harmed, and by standing firm, they will gain life.

The message did sustain them, and centuries later we know that the Church did not get wiped out by oppression, but it expanded and grew strong.

So what is the relevance of these scripture readings to us today? One common factor in both lessons is the temple being destroyed.

A few years ago I had the chance to return to the town of my birth, in Essex. The Methodist church where I had found faith had been pulled down, and a supermarket stood in its place. It was quite disconcerting. But at the Methodist church on the other side of town, I reconnected with Christians I had known in the past from my earlier church. Only the building had gone.

Our buildings do not last because they are not really meant to, and we put so much effort into building them, maintaining them and updating them, and then perhaps one day they become a millstone round our necks when we realise they lack the flexibility to serve the current age.

The earliest temple was a tent, flexible enough to move around and allow the spirit to blow through. Permanent structures root us to the spot and perhaps we then lack the flexibility we need to really serve those we need to in the way they need.

I don't know who said this, but it contains more than a grain of truth: "When the building falls down, and the pastor leaves town, the Church is what's left."

Perhaps we need to not build and rely upon structures that will not last, but remain flexible in how and where we meet, and concentrate on building up a Faith that is permanent.

I once worked with a humanist, who was convinced that through humanism, and our common humanity, the world would naturally get better and better. It is not a view I share. It is not the same picture as Jesus painted. It is not a world Luke knew. It is not a world the early church knew. It is certainly not a world we see around us if we really look.

We live in a world of conflict, a world where things do not get better all on their own.

However, we can take comfort in the timeless message of Isaiah that God is a God of renewal and restoration. We can have hope because of who God is and how he cares for his people. Isaiah's optimism was based on a God who is ever faithful. We can share that optimism.

Then Luke reminds us of the promise of Jesus that he will sustain us in difficult times and give us his spirit to be our helper. Our mission is to remain faithful to the gospel and stand firm in difficult times. Amen.

A CREED (© Bruce Prewer)

This I truly believe.

I believe in Jesus the Christ.

I believe in the ever-present Spirit

I believe in God whose love transforms all things.

Though false teachers come and delude the gullible,
God's truth remains sure.

Though temples crumble and churches wither,
God's gospel remains sure.

Though earthquakes strike and diseases ravage,
God's purpose remains sure.

Though good people suffer injustice and persecution,
God's love remains sure.

Though saints go to prison or face execution,
God's life remains sure.

I believe in God who treasures and nurtures us,
who yearns over the fate of each one as if they were all,
and who turns loss to gain and defeat to victory.
This I truly believe.

Amen!

Hymn - STF 610 Best of all is God is with us

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ig7qfNleGuQ>

Best of all is God is with us,
God will hold and never fail.
Keep that truth when storms are raging,
God remains though faith is frail.

Best of all is God is with us,
in our joy and through our pain,
till that final acclamation :
'life is Christ, and death is gain.'

Best of all is God is with us,
life goes on and needs are met,
God is strongest in our weakness.
Love renews, will not forget.

Best of all is God is with us
as we scale eternal heights,
love grows stronger, undiminished ;
earth grows dim by heaven's lights.

Best of all is God is with us,
hearts are challenged, strangely warmed,
faith is deepened, courage strengthened,
grace received and hope reformed.

Andrew Pratt (*b.* 1948)
Based on John Wesley's final words.

Commission & Benediction

Go now and tell the world what God does.
Do not chase after self-proclaimed messiahs,
but draw deeply from God's saving well
and speak the words the Spirit gives you.
Do not be weary in doing what is right.

And may God delight in you and give you strength;
May Christ Jesus lead you in the ways of new life;
And may the Holy Spirit give you the words and wisdom
to withstand all that would tear you down.