

Worship for 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (complete text. A video version is also online)
Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.

Welcome to all of you, joining us in worship today.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this service. Our preacher this week is Rev. Richard Wilde, and our readings are from Kenilworth and Kington. We are especially grateful to the technical team who turn many parts into one seamless act of worship week by week.

THE PREPARATION

Call to worship

Psalm 84 (StF 814)

1. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.
2. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young, at your altars,
O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.
3. **Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.**
4. **Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.**
5. As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
6. **They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.**

7. O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob!
8. **Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.**
9. For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
10. **I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house
of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.**
11. For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favour and honour.
**No good thing does the Lord withhold
from those who walk uprightly.**
12. **O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who
trusts in you.**

From *The New Revised Standard Version*

Hymn: StF 544 – As the deer pants for the water

1. **As the deer pants for the water,
so my soul longs after you.
You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.**
*You alone are my strength, my shield,
to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.*
2. I want you more than gold or silver,
only you can satisfy.
You alone are the real joy-giver
and the apple of my eye.
*You alone are my strength, my shield,
to you alone may my spirit yield.*

*You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.*

**3. You're my friend and you are my brother,
even though you are a king.**

**I love you more than any other,
so much more than anything.**

*You alone are my strength, my shield,
to you alone may my spirit yield.*

*You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.*

Martin J. Nystrom (b. 1956)

Opening Prayers

Welcoming God,
we come to you with open hearts
and with open hands.

We come with our faith and hope,
and with our doubts and fears.

Send your Holy Spirit to work among us,
filling us and changing us
to become more like Jesus.

Amen.

Eternal God, source of all life,
today we choose to follow you.
Be present in all we think, say and do.
Powerful redeemer, speak to our hearts.
Holy God, we draw close to you.

Amen.

Loving God, giver of life;
Lord Jesus, friend and Saviour;
Holy Spirit, living water –
we worship and adore you.
We come today,
not having or expecting all the answers
but knowing that you are the way.

Amen.

When we turn away from you, O God,
and go our own way:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.

When the way ahead is not clear,
when everything feels too much
and we turn our backs on you:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.

When we make wrong decisions
and our actions hurt others:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.

When we want to give up because it's too hard:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.

When we cannot see beyond ourselves and act
selfishly:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.

When we do not put you and others first:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.

Turn us back to you, O God.
Amen.

Despite going our own way and not following
you,
despite our doubts and fears of your presence,
you are there gently leading us,
reaching out your arms of healing and
forgiveness.

Thank you, eternal God.

The Lord's Prayer

We say the Lord's prayer:

**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 our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
For the kingdom, the power and the glory**

are yours, now and forever

Amen

Hymn: StF 354 – Jesus is the name we honour

**1. Jesus is the name we honour;
Jesus is the name we praise.
Majestic name above all other names,
the highest heav'n and earth proclaim
that Jesus is our God.**

*We will glorify,
we will lift him high,
we will give him honour and praise.
We will glorify,
we will lift him high,
we will give him honour and praise.*

**2. Jesus is the name we worship;
Jesus is the name we trust.
He is the King above all other kings,
let all creation stand and sing
that Jesus is our God.**

*We will glorify,
we will lift him high,
we will give him honour and praise.
We will glorify,
we will lift him high,
we will give him honour and praise.*

**3. Jesus is the Father's splendour;
Jesus is the Father's joy.
He will return to reign in majesty,
and every eye at last will see
that Jesus is our God.**

*We will glorify,
we will lift him high,
we will give him honour and praise.
We will glorify,
we will lift him high,
we will give him honour and praise.*

Philip Lawson-Johnston

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Ephesians 6:10-20 (NRSVA)

The Whole Armour of God

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

John 6:56-69 (NRSVA)

⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they

died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.’⁵⁹ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

The Words of Eternal Life

⁶⁰When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’

⁶¹But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, ‘Does this offend you? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But among you there are some who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵And he said, ‘For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.’

⁶⁶Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’

Sermon

A couple of memories came into my mind this weekend. The first was triggered by opening a new clerical shirt. Haven’t bought one for several years partly because of going part time semi-retired but mostly because COVID restricted visiting and live worship for so long that that section of the wardrobe has had less than normal use. However, on a hot day at market recently I was helping unload lambs from the top deck of a trailer when one skidded and splattered my shirt with – you know what! The green spots are there to stay it seems hence a new polo style shirt. As I was unpacking and

removing the collar insert, I was reminded of the school assembly when with good interactive intent and on his first visit the minister asked the children “do you know why I wear this collar?” A hand shot up and the child answered, “Is it to stop fleas and ticks?” A good answer if not the right one!

The other story is from the internet and tells of an international cross-country race in a Spanish speaking country. Runner Ivan Fernandez Anaya was heading towards the finish some way behind Kenyan runner Abel Mutai the clear winner who slowed, and stopped short of the end. Failing to understand the Spanish instructions that were over complex Abel thought he had finished. As he drew closer Ivan shouted “keep going” but still the language barrier got in the way. When he caught up Ivan rather than pass Abel he took hold of Abel and pushed him on through the end lanes so that he won the race. After Abel had been awarded the gold and Ivan the silver a reporter who had seen it asked Ivan why he hadn’t run past and claimed the race. “But what would be the merit of my victory? What would be the honour of that victory? What would my mother think of that?!”

Such honourable behaviour and true sportsmanship suggest that Ivan is a Christian person. But I am making an assumption, not unreasonable perhaps, that as the majority faith in his country is Christian and this the behaviour we all as Christians aspire to it is likely. But he could also be a Hindu, a Muslim, a Jew, or any other faith as we all share the promotion of high standards and integrity. But he might not be a person of faith at all! Too often we put things the wrong way round. We see examples of outstanding human behaviour and think that is what makes us a Christian. But in the gospels and New Testament letters it is the other way round.

If we say we are believers then this is the behaviour we should aspire to. The life, death and resurrection of Christ assure us of forgiveness and our eternal belonging to Jesus. Of his unbreakable, unshakable love for us like that of the perfect parent exemplified in the prodigal son story. It is through faith that we know Christ and respond to his invitation to follow and if that faith is real then it demands of us a new way of living that shows the world that through us Christ is present and active today.

Authentic faith is costly, inclusive and brings benefits that are out of this world! When the crowd who have been blessed by Jesus' feeding miracle begin to realise the implications then today's gospel notes how they drifted away. Like John the Baptist before him, Jesus attracted people from far and wide who enjoyed what he said. Who could see how relevant it was to others – sinners who need to change- but did not realise that His words and challenges applied to them. Once you believe, as the twelve men and unnumbered women believed, that He was the Holy One of God as Peter described Jesus then you will want to be part of the community of believers who will follow Him wherever, whatever it may cost. Jesus' audience that day were those who had enjoyed the free feast but perhaps not all realised it was a miraculous provision. Jesus links his ministry and the shared food with Moses and God's provision on the journey to freedom and the land of promise. He goes further, and uses a metaphor they found shocking. Remember, as you read these verses, that in those days Jews believed that the essence of life was carried in the blood. To drink the blood from an animal was to take its essence into yourself. To this day kosher meat (and Islam continues the tradition even more rigorously with Halaal) should not contain blood. There's no black pudding in the Middle East! So Jesus'

words recalled by John- eat my flesh and drink my blood, which we know looked forward to the Lord's Supper -what many now call Holy Communion- were not just puzzling, they were shocking. Take his life into our lives??? Take on His nature? Become like Him giving up his small carpentry business to become a penniless itinerant preacher? I don't think so. Jesus, you ask too much.

I want to return for a few minutes to the Exodus narrative they all knew so well. This "I am" metaphor is the first of seven or so that John includes. Bread deliberately links Jesus to the Old Testament. From the Exodus onwards a symbolic piece of bread was kept in every synagogue and I think, the Temple, to remind God's people of their miraculous deliverance from slavery. Unleavened bread was eaten at the Passover reminding people every year that God guided them, provided for them and delivered them after many lessons had been learned. A tension has always existed between knowing yourself to be called or chosen by God, individually in our case as Christians, and nationally as Jews both with a responsibility to be a "light to the nations" (Isaiah 42: 6, Acts 13:37) and God's inclusive love which dislikes divisions and exclusiveness.

When Solomon is exhorting the people in the newly built temple when the ark of the Covenant is put in its place (1 Kings 8 v 41-43) he says

"As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name— ⁴²for they will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm— when they come and pray toward this temple, ⁴³then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you,

as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.

It seems to me that while God asks people to know who they are individually and as a nation and treasure that identity and the narrative that defined them/us we do so in a way that is respectful and inclusive of all people. As a denomination we are currently being sorely tested by the recent Conference report, "God in love unites us." Some things I have read on Methodist Facebook pages and heard/overheard are disappointing in that they tend to exclusion and judgement of sincere people who disagree with interpretation of Scripture in modern society. These self-righteous words come from both sides of the debate – those who feel they can no longer be part of the Methodist Church and those who wish them gone, the sooner the better. While the majority of us weep at the division and yearn for respectful disagreement to be held together in Godly love. The world, from what one sees and reads can be very intolerant, exclusive and uncaring – just listen to the things said about trafficked women, men and children who land on our shores who once landed will be held in assessment centres for many months, denied the dignity of working for a living while their asylum claim is processed. A mental health nurse was telling me recently of her support of one such man held, so far, for five years in this limbo. Such people are surely victims of crime, not criminals who should be deported as some people are lobbying for.

Responding to God's love in Christ can be costly and demands uncomfortable inclusiveness but it is richly rewarding in this life and the next. "If anyone eats of the bread he/she will live forever" v 58. To be honest I have little idea of what lies beyond this mortal life and am wary of

any who claim to have a clear understanding. It would be like trying to explain to an unborn child what life outside the womb will be like. The child will have heard sounds from within her/his mother and may have known mood changes etc that mother is going through. But has yet to experience light, let alone all that we discover as we grow and develop from the moment, we take our first breath. I am content to trust God that while we have vague glimpses 'a foretaste of the heavenly banquet', is how some liturgies describe The Lord's Supper, it will mostly be a new journey discovering new things in closer presence of God. But eternal life is not just about immortality. It's a wonderful, fulfilled life here and now. As I look back on the 45 years since I first asked Jesus to enter my life and fill me with His Spirit, I am deeply grateful for the fullness I have known. I have a reason to be alive every day, things to do that are worthwhile. While accepting a call to a whole life ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care was, and has often been costly, it is also hugely rewarding. Sitting listening as I did this week to a young woman who wants to be a church member moved me almost to tears. Moments in worship when like Wesley I feel "lost in wonder, love and praise" both in the congregation and at the front. Revisiting churches that were opened when I was with the congregation now well established and in one case starting a daughter church of their own. And so I could go on. That's just my experience of following Jesus and you will have your own story to tell I hope. I can testify that accepting the invitation to 'eat my flesh and drink my blood' that I said 'yes please' to has been costly, is inclusive and so richly rewarding in this life while the best is yet to come!

Hymn: StF 637 – Soldiers of Christ arise

1. **Soldiers of Christ, arise,
and put your armour on,
strong in the strength which God supplies
through his eternal Son;
strong in the Lord of hosts,
and in his mighty power,
who in the strength of Jesus trusts
is more than conqueror.**
2. **Stand then in his great might,
with all his strength endued;
but take, to arm you for the fight,
the panoply of God;
that, having all things done,
and all your conflicts passed,
you may o'ercome through Christ alone,
and stand complete at last.**
3. **Leave no unguarded place,
no weakness of the soul;
take every virtue, every grace,
and fortify the whole:
indissolubly joined,
to battle all proceed;
but arm yourselves with all the mind
that was in Christ, your Head.**
4. **From strength to strength go on,
wrestle, and fight, and pray,
tread all the powers of darkness down,
and win the well-fought day;
still let the Spirit cry
in all his soldiers: come!
Till Christ the Lord descend from high,
and take the conquerors home.**

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

THE RESPONSE

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession

Thank you, Lord, for your unfailing love.

Thank you that even with all our doubts and fears

and worries about the journey ahead,
you are there by our side.

Where else can we turn? To whom shall we go?

Thank you that you are our rock and our salvation,

our strength and our high tower.

Thank you that as we choose to go on this journey with you,

as we make decisions and plans,

you are there, gently leading and guiding,
always present.

Praise you, Lord, for your constant love and faithfulness.

Amen.

O God, who answers prayer,

we hear the words of Paul the apostle.

He exhorts us to pray

on all occasions

and with all kinds of prayers and requests.

We pray for communities that have seen tragedy.

For vulnerable people who struggle to face what life

throws at them.

May they be built up in your love and strength.

Lord, we pray in your Spirit.

We pray for people who suffer for their faith.

For ministers and evangelists who seek to spread your word.

For us all as we share the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May they, and may we, be built up in your love and strength.

Lord, we pray in your Spirit.

We pray for people who feel bound
by chains of unemployment and poverty,
chains of disability or illness,
chains of sorrow.

Lord, we pray in your Spirit.

We pray for ourselves when we feel vulnerable.
May they, and may we, be built up in your love
and strength.

Lord, we pray in your Spirit.

Amen.

The Offering & prayer

Generous God,
you always love us,
always want the best for us,
always inspire us to grow.
You offer us life in all its fullness,
and give us the freedom to choose
how we respond to you.
We offer our lives back to you,
and pray that you accept our love in return.

Amen.

THE DISMISSAL

Hymn: StF 363 – My Jesus, my Saviour

**My Jesus, my Saviour,
Lord there is none like you.
All of my days I want to praise
the wonders of your mighty love.
My comfort, my shelter,
tower of refuge and strength,
let every breath, all that I am,
never cease to worship you.**

***Shout to the Lord all the earth, let us sing,
power and majesty, praise to the King.
Mountains bow down
and the seas will roar
at the sound of your name.
I sing for joy at the work of your hands.
Forever I'll love you, forever I'll stand.***

***Nothing compares to the
promise I have in you.***

Darlene Zschech (b. 1965)

Prayer & blessing

Lord Jesus Christ,
to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life,
and we have come to believe and know
that you are the Holy One of God.
Go with us into your world.

Amen.

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Martin J. Nystrom (b. 1956)

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Philip Lawson-Johnston

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Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

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StF 363 – My Jesus, my Saviour

Darlene Zschech (b. 1965)

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NRSV & NRSVA

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