

**Worship for 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (complete text. A video version is also online)
 Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.**

Welcome everyone. It's lovely to have you join us for worship whenever you are able to settle to worship with us. Maybe you are joining us live on Sunday morning, or maybe you have found time to download the service at another time. God is able to use our time whenever we come to Him. I know, personally, that some of the churches in the circuit have been available for people to be able to worship together. Keeping safe, either inside or outside. The wonderful weather for September has helped to facilitate these gatherings. Maybe we will all have to join together remotely again to worship, so we give thanks to those who contribute and make these times possible.

*To:
 Barbara for sharing, Margaret and Russell for reading, Sam for preparing the Hymns and songs and Michael and I for the prayers.
 Of course, there are those behind the scenes as well. Tim and Kate who co-ordinate it all. Thank you
 If you would like to take part, then please get in touch with the Circuit Office on swc.katetennyson@gmail.com*

THE PREPARATION

Call to worship

He makes us this promise in James' letter: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" Let's draw near to God together and enjoy His promise together today.

Hymn: StF 434 – Rock of Ages cleft for me

**1. Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
 let me hide myself in thee;
 let the water and the blood,
 from thy riven side which flowed,
 be of sin the double cure,
 cleanse me from its guilt and power.**

**2. Not the labours of my hands
 can fulfil thy law's demands;
 could my zeal no respite know,
 could my tears for ever flow,
 all for sin could not atone:
 thou must save, and thou alone.**

**3. Nothing in my hand I bring,
 simply to thy cross I cling;
 naked, come to thee for dress;
 helpless, look to thee for grace;
 foul, I to the fountain fly;
 was me, Saviour, or I die.**

**4. While I draw this fleeting breath,
 when mine eyes shall close in death,
 when I soar through tracts unknown,
 see thee on thy judgement throne,
 Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
 let me hide myself in thee.**

Opening Prayers

As we pray this morning, I would like to encourage you to do as some of the folks who have done during August, to think of things to be thankful for and also to say sorry for beginning with the same letter.

The book of Lamentations has five chapters and each of the verses of 4 chapters begins with a separate letter of the Hebrew alphabet (22 of them). Chapter 3 has 66 verses and uses each letter twice.

So in our prayers we'll use some of the 3's

Let us pray;

Lord we give you our grateful thanks for:

Faith/ Family/ Friends

Help/ Hope /Home

Caring/ Comfort / Compassion

We want to say that we are truly sorry for:
Turning aside/ Being tentative in loving/ not trusting
Aiming too low / Actions/ Application
Forgetting / Foolishness / Forests.

We give ourselves to you afresh this morning knowing that you have spoken your word to us which says:

⁴ because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

In all these prayers and time together Father we come to you through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen

Hymn: StF 338 – There is a Redeemer

**1. There is a Redeemer,
Jesus, God's own Son,
precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
Holy One.**

*Thank you, O my Father,
for giving us your Son,
and leaving your Spirit
till the work on earth is done.*

**2. Jesus my Redeemer,
name above all names,
precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
O for sinners slain.**

*Thank you, O my Father,
for giving us your Son,
and leaving your Spirit
till the work on earth is done.*

**3. When I stand in glory
I will see his face,
and there I'll serve my King for ever
in that holy place.**

***Thank you, O my Father,
for giving us your Son,
and leaving your Spirit
till the work on earth is done.***

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

1st Reading Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

(New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised)

Individual Retribution

^{18:1}The word of the Lord came to me: ²What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? ³As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.

²⁵Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is unfair.' Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? ²⁶When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. ²⁷Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. ²⁸Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. ²⁹Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is unfair.' O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

³⁰Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. ³¹Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³²For I have no

pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

Psalm Psalm 25:1-9

(New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised)

Prayer for Guidance and for Deliverance Of David.

¹To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

²O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.

³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.

⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

⁸Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

Epistle Philippians 2:1-13

(New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised)

Imitating Christ's Humility

^{2:1}If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the

same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Shining as Lights in the World

¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Gospel Matthew 21:23-32

(New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised)

The Authority of Jesus Questioned

²³When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' ²⁴Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask

you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?” ²⁶But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’ ²⁷So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

The Parable of the Two Sons

²⁸‘What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” ²⁹He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Sermon

“It’s not fair!” As playgrounds up and down the country fill up again, that cry will be heard plenty of times – but not only there. It’s not fair that my child can sit in a class of 30 all day, but can’t have a few friends round because then there would be more than six people present; it’s not fair that my neighbour (who doesn’t have any off-road parking), parks their car right at the end of my drive, so it’s difficult for me to get my car out; it’s not fair that I can’t go on my Spanish holiday now, because I would have to quarantine when I get home; it’s not fair that life is inconsistent, and sometimes painful and difficult. But who ever said that life would always be fair?

Looking at today’s readings, you might think that the Bible says life should be fair. The people of Ezekiel’s day were complaining about a pronouncement which had recently been made to the effect that from then on, people would suffer only for their own wrongdoing and not that of other people; sons and daughters would not be punished for what their parents had done. To us that probably seems natural and right, because we have all grown up in a culture which assumes that every individual is responsible for their own actions; in ancient Israel, as in many other cultures, people were seen as part of households and tribes, and collective punishment was common. So this new edict which God was giving of everyone being held responsible only for their own actions was a new and radical departure – so much so, that they called it ‘unfair.’

In our Gospel reading, Jesus develops this idea further. Not only is each individual responsible for their own actions and must bear the consequences of it, they are also responsible for any decision they make to change their ways. A person who has been thoroughly bad, if they turn round and start to do what is right, is forgiven. By contrast, someone who does everything right for most of their life and then goes off the rails at the end, will come to a sticky end, Jesus seems to suggest.

Is that fair? Is that right?

Remember that Jesus was speaking to the chief priests and elders, who were thoroughly hostile towards him, as their questioning demonstrates. They were holier than thou. They prided themselves on the extent to which they adhered to the last detail of the law and were judgemental towards the common people, who fell into all kinds of traps and pitfalls. Jesus, by contrast, was compassionate towards the common people, with all their failures and ordinary everyday weaknesses. He loved them,

as God the Father loves them, and was delighted that they were eager to hear the message of God's love which he was bringing.

That is entering the Kingdom of Heaven: it happens here and now when we realise that God loves us, whether our path through life has been noble and above reproach, or full of pain received and inflicted. As soon as we recognise the magnitude of God's love, we know that we are forgiven – more than that, we are cherished. Now, in one way, that is not fair, because the worst hardened criminal who has done unspeakable things, can know God's love and grace, while the person who has lived an upright life, can share the judgmentalism of the chief priests and elders, which Jesus condemned.

The thing is – the people who most need to know love are the ones who don't think very much of themselves. And how do we arrive at a place where we don't think very much of ourselves? Well, if you scratch the surface, you find that most people will resonate with negative statements about themselves, such as "I'm not very clever," or "I always get things wrong," or "I'm only a...." whatever belittling term you come up with. We all carry these wounds, they start early in life with the things that parents and teachers and older siblings say to us, we deduce meaning from them and we take them as truth, even though, when carefully examined, they often have no objective basis at all. They shape and mould our beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, they restrict what we attempt in life, and the possibilities to which we open ourselves up. In this way, the sins of the fathers are visited on the children, to the third and fourth generation, without there ever being any malice or intention to wound. And then there are those who are born into families which are abusive, or dysfunctional, where there is illness or separation, or poverty, or addiction. Their life chances are seriously hampered compared to

those who don't experience these more serious adverse circumstances.

Life is not fair. It isn't fair that some people are born into peace and material security, while others are born into poverty, or slavery, or a war zone. It isn't fair that the generation returning to school this September will have to deal with the full effects of climate change, while many of us who benefited from cheap energy and the massive increase in car use and cheap flights, will have shuffled off this mortal coil before most of the chickens have come home to roost. It's not fair that Covid preferentially attacks the old, the already sick, those of non-European origin, or that the economic fallout of the pandemic is being felt primarily by the young and the low paid.

Where things most definitely are equal is in the way that God looks at each one of us, with infinite love and patience. "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord," according to Ezekiel. It is never God's desire for people to suffer, whether that suffering comes about through their own actions, or somebody else's, or by chance. And when someone has suffered, or caused suffering, it is always God's desire to bring healing, forgiveness and reconciliation.

You are never too old to let go of old hurts, resentment or guilt. It is never too late to make peace with the events of the past, though it is often not easy. The Holy Spirit stands ready to breathe her loving, healing breath over every wound, every mistake, every scar, when we offer it to her.

As we experience God's compassion and grace, we then turn our gaze towards others, and discover that they are not so different from us. They have their own needs, their own insecurities, their own reasons for thinking the things they do and doing the things they do – including the ones which upset us. And God's healing gaze is aimed at them as well.

Maybe later today, or tomorrow, you might like to take a few minutes to sit quietly and recall some event in your life about which you still feel emotional when you think about. Notice what that emotion is – is it anger, or guilt, or sorrow? Invite God to heal the wounds of the past and sit quietly while the Holy Spirit does her gentle work. You might find that you feel different afterwards. There is no limit to what God can do.

Hymn: StF 345 – And can it be

1. **And can it be that I should gain
an interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?**
2. **'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!
Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
to sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
let angel minds enquire no more.**
3. **He left his Father's throne above –
so free, so infinite his grace –
emptied himself of all but love,
and bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
for, O my God, it found out me!**
4. **Long my imprisoned spirit lay
fast bound in sin and nature's night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray –
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,
my chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.**
5. **No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is min!
Alive in him, my living Head,
and clothed in righteousness divine,
bold I approach the eternal throne,**

and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

THE RESPONSE

Prayers of thanksgiving

Lord we give you thanks that we can put our trust in you
In you lord God there is no shame.
When we put our hope in you Lord you watch over us and do not let us down

Lord God show us anew your ways,
Your ways of love and compassion for all your children.

Refresh us in your spirit and enable us to see the beauty of your creation.
We give thanks for this day – and that you give us

Amen

Prayers of intercession

We come now to God with our prayers of intercession:

Gracious God, we lay before you our lives, our hearts, minds and spirits
We ask that you speak into us now so we may feel your loving touch

We bring to mind people and situations in our lives that we ask for your touch on
– for people who are ill, lonely or overwhelmed
– people who are losing employment or struggling to find work.
People who are not able to see loved ones or are cut off from social activities.

We pray for our land, for our Methodist church and all churches that proclaim your name – we pray that we can find ways to share your good news with our communities, that we may find ways meet and celebrate your love for us.

We pray for those in need, for families accessing foodbanks and other support services to get

through these difficult times. We pray for justice and equality, for peace on our streets and a respect for all

We pray for the world. For the fires burning in California and all those who have been displaced by this disaster. We pray too for all those who have been displaced through war and famine around the world.

In this time of silence now we pray for ourselves for our own needs and the things that burden us – we pray that you may lift us up and hold us firm in your loving embrace

Silence

Amen

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**

The Offering & prayer

God of all goodness and grace,
receive the gifts we offer;
and grant that our whole life
may give you glory and praise;
through Christ our Lord.
Amen

THE DISMISSAL

Hymn: StF 477 – Teach me to dance

*Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart,
teach me to move in the power of your Spirit,
teach me to walk in the light of your
presence,
teach me to dance to the beat of your heart.
Teach me to love with your heart of
compassion,
teach me to trust in the word of your
promise,
teach me to hope in the day of your coming,
teach me to dance to the beat of your heart.*

- 1. You wrote the rhythm of life,
created heaven and earth;
in you is joy without measure.
So, like a child in your sight,
I dance to see your delight,
for I was made for your pleasure,
pleasure.**

*Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart,
teach me to move in the power of your
Spirit,
teach me to walk in the light of your
presence,
teach me to dance to the beat of your heart.
Teach me to love with your heart of
compassion,
teach me to trust in the word of your
promise,
teach me to hope in the day of your coming,
teach me to dance to the beat of your heart.*

- 2. Let all my movements express
a heart that loves to say 'yes',
a will that leaps to obey you.
Let all my energy blaze
to see the joy in your face,
let my whole being praise you,
praise you.**

*Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart,
teach me to move in the power of your*

***Spirit,
teach me to walk in the light of your
presence,
teach me to dance to the beat of your heart.
Teach me to love with your heart of
compassion,
teach me to trust in the word of your
promise,
teach me to hope in the day of your coming,
teach me to dance to the beat of your heart.***

Prayer & blessing

We say together:

**The love of the Father enfold us,
the wisdom of the Son enlighten us,
the fire of the Spirit enflame us;
and the blessing of God, the Three in One,
be upon us and abide with us now and forever.
Amen.**