

Worship for 2nd Sunday of Christmas (complete text. A video version is also online)
Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.

Hello everyone.

A warm welcome to this service on the 3rd January 2021 (just getting used to saying 2021 and putting it into practice).

So thank you to all those that have been involved in putting this service together. Thank you to Margaret and to Tim for the readings, thank you to Nigel for sharing the word with us and thank you to Janet for the pastoral letter.

The Circuit, the South Warwickshire Methodist circuit, has had wonderfully varied opportunities for worship and prayer over recent months, and we do hope that you have been able to join the services or events whether in person or online as and when you have been able. It was lovely to be able to enjoy “drive in” carols at Stoneleigh and sing “safely”.

But best of all we have been able to share in the message to the church here and nationwide that “God is with us”

Several churches in the circuit remain open for worship on Sundays, - in addition to this circuit service we have had the Family worship time. There are opportunities for fellowship with folks from the circuit and individual churches. Please do look on the South Warwickshire Methodist Circuit website for details of services and opportunities available.

The national website also has details of the work of the church nationwide and worldwide. ‘All We Can’ continues to be involved in initiatives internationally – do take a look.

So now just a verse from John’s first letter

1 John 4:19

We love because he first loved us.

THE PREPARATION

Hymn: StF 132 – O God our help in ages past

- 1. O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast,
and our eternal home.**
- 2. Under the shadow of thy throne
thy saints have dwelt secure;
sufficient is thine arm alone,
and our defence is sure.**
- 3. Before the hills in order stood,
or earth received her frame,
from everlasting thou art God,
to endless years the same.**
- 4. A thousand ages in thy sight
are like an evening gone,
short as the watch that ends the night
before the rising sun.**
- 5. The busy tribes of flesh and blood,
with all their cares and fears,
are carried downward by the flood,
and lost in following years.**
- 6. Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
bears all its sons away;
they fly forgotten, as a dream
dies at the opening day.**
- 7. O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
be thou our guard while life shall last,
and our eternal home.**

Isaac Watts (1674 – 1748)

Opening Prayers.

Let us pray together:

God, our creator Father and friend, we give thanks for the wonderful gift of life, with all its joys and all its responsibilities, its experiences and opportunities.

We praise you for the good health that we've had, our daily food, for the shelter and the care of our homes, and the love and loyalty of our friends.

We bless you for work honestly done, for games well played, and for all the truth we've learned and the good that we've been able to achieve.

We thank you for the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness and salvation we have received through him, for his presence with us always and for the service into which he has called us.

Help us to express our thanks not only in our praises and prayers, but also through the lives that we lead; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Prayer of St Francis of Assisi:

You are holy, Lord, the only God,
And your deeds are wonderful
You are love, you are wisdom,
You are humility, you are endurance.
You are rest, you are peace.
You are our riches, and you suffice us.
You are beauty, you are gentleness.
You are our protector.
You are our guardian and defender.
You are courage,
You are our haven and hope.
You are our faith, our great consolation.
You are our eternal life, great and wonderful
Lord,
God almighty, merciful saviour.

We ask for your forgiveness when our lives don't reflect and show forth the truth of all that you are and have shown us. We know that you are ready to forgive us, but we are truly sorry.

Help us to live from now, the reality of your great love for us.

Amen.

Hymn: How deep the Father's love for us

- 1. How deep the Father's love for us
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure**
- 2. How great the pain of searing loss
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory**
- 3. Behold the man upon a cross
My sin upon His shoulders
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers**
- 4. It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished**
- 5. I will not boast in anything
No gifts, no power, no wisdom
But I will boast in Jesus Christ
His death and resurrection**
- 6. Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom**
- 7. Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer**

**But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom**

Stuart Townend

© 1995 Thankyou Music (Adm. by Capitol CMG Publishing.com excl. UK & Europe, adm. by Integrity Music, part of the David C Cook family, songs@integritymusic.com)

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

1st Reading *Jeremiah 31:7-14 (NIVUK)*

⁷This is what the Lord says:

‘Sing with joy for Jacob;
shout for the foremost of the nations.
Make your praises heard, and say,
“Lord, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.”

⁸See, I will bring them from the land of the north
and gather them from the ends of the earth.
Among them will be the blind and the lame,
expectant mothers and women in labour;
a great throng will return.

⁹They will come with weeping;
they will pray as I bring them back.
I will lead them beside streams of water
on a level path where they will not stumble,
because I am Israel’s father,
and Ephraim is my firstborn son.

¹⁰Hear the word of the Lord, you nations;
proclaim it in distant coastlands:
“He who scattered Israel will gather them
and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.”

¹¹For the Lord will deliver Jacob
and redeem them from the hand of those
stronger than they.

¹²They will come and shout for joy on the heights
of Zion;
they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord –
the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,
the young of the flocks and herds.
They will be like a well-watered garden,

and they will sorrow no more.

¹³Then young women will dance and be glad,
young men and old as well.

I will turn their mourning into gladness;
I will give them comfort and joy instead of
sorrow.

¹⁴I will satisfy the priests with abundance,
and my people will be filled with my bounty,’
declares the Lord.

Psalm *84 (NIVUK)*

¹How lovely is your dwelling-place,
Lord Almighty!

²My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.

³Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young –
a place near your altar,
Lord Almighty, my King and my God.

⁴Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.

⁵Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

⁶As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

⁷They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.

⁸Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.

⁹Look on our shield, O God;
look with favour on your anointed one.

¹⁰Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house
of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

¹¹For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
the Lord bestows favour and honour;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose way of life is blameless.

¹²Lord Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you.

Epistle Ephesians 1:3-14 (NRSVA)

Spiritual Blessings in Christ

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Gospel Luke 2:41-52 (NRSVA)

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

⁴¹Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' ⁴⁹He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

Sermon

Re- ordering our first loves.

We have celebrated the birth of Jesus & now reached the 2nd Sunday after Christmas. I have used passages from the lectionary and my dominant thought for today's talk is "Let us consider re- ordering our first loves".

Psalm 84 is a Psalm of praise, it expresses a longing to be in the presence of God. In October 1944, Nazis attacked the village of Putten in the occupied Netherlands, and took nearly all of its male population to concentration camps from which only a few returned alive. As they were being deported, the village men sang Psalm 84. I think that to be able to sing in praise to God at such a time, tells us much. Let us ask ourselves whether we are so aware of the excellence of God as to be able to carry our vision of His glory into a situation like that? I am preaching to myself as always.

Now to Jeremiah. As you know many are not keen on Jeremiah as they find him daunting, difficult and depressing. However, our reading from Chapter 31 comes within chapters 21 – 45 where the prophet looks beyond the time of exile to one of ultimate restoration. As punishment for decades of serious sin, particularly that of idolatry under Kings who 'did not do what was pleasing in the sight of the Lord' most of the people of Israel and Judah spend 70 years in exile in Babylon. Jeremiah utters dire warnings but he also tells of God's promise of a return to better times We are also looking forward to better days once the vaccination programme becomes fully manifest. Now to verse 12 of Jeremiah 31 where we are told:-

For the LORD has redeemed Israel from those too strong for them. They will come home and sing songs of joy on the heights of Jerusalem. They will be radiant because of the LORD's good gifts— the abundant crops of grain, new wine, and olive oil, and the healthy flocks and herds.

Yes the gifts are listed, and the origin of them as being from the Lord that is stressed. The writer delights in God, before praising Him for anything else. Since that is true in the Old Testament, it applies much more to those living after the

coming of Jesus who rescues us from sin, delivers us from death and restores our status as children of God.

Next to Ephesians where Paul sends a summary of Christian belief to believers living in Ephesus. It is the closest we have to Paul's statement of the Gospel, it is the most systematic of any of Paul's letters with a very clear structure. The first half is about our relationship to God in Christ, how through Christ we have been justified – set right with God, the second is about our relationship to others in the Lord. In the first part, Paul begins by explaining the doctrine of salvation in the context of a service of worship. His order begins with praising so it is no surprise that verse 3 says:-

“All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.”

From this we can see that as New Testament believers, our spiritual blessings are on account of the life of Christ and, crucially, His sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection. This is the foundation for our praise to God. Let's go a bit deeper into this. In Jeremiah, God's people were praising Him for material things. Most of us have much for which to thank God – family, friends, homes, food, fresh water, clothes, scenery, music, - this can be a very long list if we keep going – gardens, cars, computers, holidays, televisions, bikes, books, cameras, furniture, on and on.

We need to take care that whilst being grateful for all these things our delight in God is not being eroded. If they take the place of God himself we are heading into idolatry which is why God

disciplined his people in the Old Testament so severely. Let us consider unbelievers, they can have emotions of pleasure in things without delighting in God. But our gratitude is at a higher level, the spiritual level, on account of Christ. For all other blessings it is quite OK to be grateful, but they must not take first place. Actually this is a positive, because all these other things are temporary.

The theologian John Piper writes that having is simply not the key to happiness. He tells us that we must be wired to disbelieve this, or God would not insist on it so often. The Proverbs make the point again and again, for example in 17 v 1 it says “A meal of bread and water in a contented peace is better than a banquet spiced with quarrels”. Some of you will know the famous line from Jim Elliot who said “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose”. What if all the Covid vaccines were found to fail to give protection after three months, or another deadly virus appears? Yes we will be very disappointed, but our relationship to God is not diminished, so our joy in God should continue.

Now comes the tough question. What about praising God when our lives are falling apart? Up in Kendal I knew a lady whose husband died on a Friday but on the Sunday during worship her delight in God was so genuine it made a deep impression on me. Years later storm Desmond caused massive flood damage in Kendal. A retired vicar lived on the Shap road where his house was flooded. His friends were amazed at how well he withstood that trial which bore witness to his faith being on solid ground. We all know Jesus' parable about houses built on sand or on rock. One fact is that unbelievers are always watching us as people of faith. It is another fact, that you can see me, but it is only

faith that makes me believe that any of you are listening!

Of course it is easy to praise God when things are going well – but there is a real danger here - when we make our circumstances to be the source of our praise rather than the God who came to us in Jesus. We can even move into idolatry during worship, by putting ourselves at the centre of things if we are praising God because we are feeling great. Then it's all about me, me, me rather than God, and of course the other side of that is being easily being discontented with worship that does not suit us.

It is appreciation of what Jesus has done on the cross that is the foundation for our love of God. We need to hold this in our hearts so that it is there in our times of hurt and brokenness. God knows what is going on in our hearts. In Ezekiel he tells this prophet “I the Lord will punish those who set up idols in their hearts so that they fall into sin.” I find it useful to start praising God when small things go wrong, so as to establish a habit to get the right things in place for when the big stuff hits – which it will. Have you heard about the worry bag? This is the container we have for troubles. We tend to fill it with either big things OR small things so the size of the bag and what is in that bag matters a lot. Our worry bag should certainly be smaller than the bag of delight that we have for God. Habakkuk puts this much better than me. He writes: -

Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!

These words from Habakkuk were before the coming of Jesus. For us as believers in Christ, delight in God flows from the stock of love already in the heart established by recognition of the beauty and the excellence of God's character because of what he has done for us in Jesus.

There will always be things that annoy us & give us discontent. In our reading from Luke, Mary & Joseph were more than discontented. Mary says to Jesus "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere." That worry bag of Mary and Joseph was overflowing. Jesus replies to his parents "Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" He is telling them to re-calibrate how they see him. It might be necessary for us to review how we see Jesus as this new year begins. To live well as Christians could mean the re-ordering of our first loves.

So to sum up and as ever I am preaching to myself: when we thank God for future gifts – like a removal of Covid restrictions – let us remember that God is not glorified if the foundation of our gratitude is the worth of the gift and not the excellency of the giver.

May God grant us hearts to have such joy in God, that all other gifts are an echo of that first delight in knowing him. Amen.

Since the cross is the foundation for our love of God, I have chosen a song on that theme to close my talk, it is called 'The power of the Cross'.

Hymn: Power of the Cross

**Oh, to see the dawn
Of the darkest day:
Christ on the road to Calvary.
Tried by sinful men,
Torn and beaten, then
Nailed to a cross of wood.**

***This, the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us,
Took the blame, bore the wrath:
We stand forgiven at the cross.***

**Oh, to see the pain
Written on Your face
Bearing the awesome weight of sin;
Every bitter thought,
Every evil deed
Crowning Your bloodstained brow.**

***This, the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us,
Took the blame, bore the wrath:
We stand forgiven at the cross.***

**Now the daylight flees,
Now the ground beneath
Quakes as its Maker bows His head.
Curtain torn in two,
Dead are raised to life;
'Finished!' the victory cry.**

***This, the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us,
Took the blame, bore the wrath:
We stand forgiven at the cross.***

**Oh, to see my name
Written in the wounds,
For through Your suffering I am free.
Death is crushed to death,
Life is mine to live,
Won through Your selfless love.**

***This, the power of the cross:
Son of God, slain for us.
What a love! What a cost!
We stand forgiven at the cross.***

Stuart Townend & Keith Getty Copyright © 2005 Thankyou Music (Adm. by CapitolCMGPublishing.com excl. UK & Europe, adm. by Integrity Music, part of the David C Cook family, songs@integritymusic.com)

THE RESPONSE

Closing Prayers:

We'll pray again

Lord we come to you in prayer, having heard your words spoken to us and shared with us this morning.

May our prayers today be as cries from our heart. We would be like David who opened his heart to you and didn't hold back.

In all that we say and do may we "focus" on you as our First Love and may you become "First" in everything we do and say.

We ask for your grace to make this possible, knowing that the only way we can really live well and to your glory is through your grace as you FIRST loved us.

We thank you with all our hearts for the things that you say and speak to us. That you save us from ourselves and enable us to be your sons and daughters.

We open our hearts to you afresh and ask you to hear our prayers not just for ourselves but for others in need.

We pray in the quiet now for those we know who are suffering through illness or loss of loved ones.

....

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray for those who seek to help and continue to serve others at this time.

....

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray for those who are suffering through having no money or who are homeless. Help

those who have to give and make provision for them.

....

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Give us open hearts, hands and lives to listen to your voice in these days and to respond to you.

....

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We ask you that you will release us from the grip of Covid.

....

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We ask that you overrule in allowing essential supplies into and out of the country. Break pride and melt hearts we pray.

....

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We gather up all these prayers together and say the prayer which our Lord taught us.

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 us 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 for ever.

Amen

THE DISMISSAL

Hymn: When peace like a river attendeth my way
(It is well with my soul)

1. **When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll;
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to
say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."**

*It is well with my soul;
it is well, it is well with my soul.*

2. **Though Satan should buffet, though trials
should come,
let this blest assurance control:
that Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
and has shed his own blood for my soul.**

*It is well with my soul;
it is well, it is well with my soul.*

3. **My sin oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
my sin, not in part, but the whole,
is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more;
praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!**

*It is well with my soul;
it is well, it is well with my soul.*

4. **O Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be
sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
the trump shall resound and the Lord shall
descend;
even so, it is well with my soul.**

*It is well with my soul;
it is well, it is well with my soul.*

Horatio Gates Spafford (1828-1888)

New Year's benediction

In this New Year
May the God who gives us this year
and the Saviour who walks at our side each day
and the Spirit who fills us with life abundantly,
give grace for the coming year with peace and
hope and joy,
Amen.

If you would like to take part, then please get in touch with the Circuit Office on
swc.katetennyson@gmail.com

Copyright Notices

Hymn Words:

StF 132 – O God our help in ages past
Isaac Watts (1674 – 1748)

Reprinted with permission under ONE LICENSE, License # **A-736737**. All rights reserved

How deep the Father's love for us
Stuart Townend

© 1995 Thankyou Music (Adm. by Capitol CMG Publishing.com excl. UK & Europe, adm. by Integrity Music, part of the David C Cook family, songs@integritymusic.com)

Reprinted with permission under licence 007316

Power of the Cross

Stuart Townend & Keith Getty Copyright © 2005 Thankyou Music (Adm. by CapitolCMGPublishing.com excl. UK & Europe, adm. by Integrity Music, part of the David C Cook family, songs@integritymusic.com)

Reprinted with permission under licence 007316

When peace like a river attendeth my way (It is well with my soul)

Horatio Gates Spafford (1828-1888)

Reprinted with permission under ONE LICENSE, License # **A-736737**. All rights reserved

Bible Verses

Scripture quotations marked NRSVA are from New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked (NIVUK) are from New International Version UK, copyright © biblica.com. All rights reserved