



**Call to Worship:** Let us come before God in worship, not as fearful servants but as loved friends and invited guests. *"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you"* (John 15:15).

**Hymn:** 'He calls me friend' Watch on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PpiezP6xRM>

*I have a friend, a faithful friend  
And Jesus is His name  
He will not leave, He stands by me  
My Shepherd He remains*

*I have a friend, a mighty friend  
And Jesus is His name  
I shall not fear, He holds me near  
His strength will keep me safe*

*His name is True King, Lord of creation  
Ruler without end  
I call Him Hope, Peace, Wonderful Saviour  
And what joy that Jesus calls me friend!*

*I have a friend, the kindest friend  
And Jesus is His name*

*He hears my cry, by day or night  
And wipes my tears away*

*His name is True King, Lord of creation  
Ruler without end  
I call Him Hope, Peace, Wonderful Saviour  
And what joy that Jesus calls me friend!*

*I have a friend, a Saviour friend  
And Jesus is His name  
He fought for me on Calvary  
And trampled on the grave!*

*His name is True King, Lord of creation  
Ruler without end  
I call Him Hope, Peace, Wonderful Saviour  
And what joy that Jesus calls me friend!*

Words and Music by Harrison Druery, Michael Farren, Jonny Robinson and Rich Thompson  
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## Prayer

In our prayers we reflect upon the words of an old hymn:

*Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,  
tender and true,  
out of the heart of the Father above,  
streaming to me and to you:  
wonderful love  
dwells in the heart of the Father above.*

*Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,  
joyfully came,  
came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,  
sharing their sorrow and shame;  
seeking the lost,  
saving, redeeming at measureless cost.*

*Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;  
why do they roam,  
Love only waits to forgive and forget;  
home, weary wanderers, home!  
Wonderful love  
dwells in the heart of the Father above.*

*Come to my heart, O thou wonderful Love,  
come and abide,  
lifting my life till it rises above  
envy and falsehood and pride;  
seeking to be  
lowly and humble, a learner of thee.*

## We thank God,

- For the indescribable, boundless, wonderful love that he has for us and for all the world;
- For the fullest expression of that love in the sending of Jesus both to show us how to live God's way and to die on the cross for our sins that we might be set free to fully live God's way;
- For the work of the Holy Spirit who makes the love of Jesus real in our world today and calls people towards the heart of the Father;
- And for all those ways that we have known and been able to pass on God's love in our personal lives.

## **We confess**

-The place of envy, falsehood and pride in our lives and pray that our lives may indeed be 'lifted' above such things as we seek to walk with Jesus as his disciples.

**Amen.**

**Readings: Exodus 32: 1-14 and Matthew 22: 1-14**

**Hymn:** StF 35 'The Feast is ready to begin'

Watch on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izym6R3vIF4>

*The trumpets sound, the angels sing  
The feast is ready to begin  
The gates of heaven are open wide  
And Jesus welcomes you inside*

*Tables are laden with good things  
O taste the peace and joy he brings  
He'll fill you up with love divine  
He'll turn your water into wine*

*Sing with thankfulness songs of pure delight  
Come and revel in heaven's love and light  
Take your place at the table of the King  
The feast is ready to begin  
The feast is ready to begin*

*The hungry heart he satisfies*

*Offers the poor his paradise  
Now hear all heaven and earth applaud  
The amazing goodness of the Lord*

*Jesus (All echo each line)*

*We thank you  
For your love  
For your joy*

*Jesus  
We thank you  
For the good things  
You give to us*

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## **Message:**

This week's Old Testament reading is the latest in a series of snapshots of the Israelites as they are being led by Moses, from slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness and on a journey that would lead eventually to the Promised Land. Who are these people? They are a group of people that have grown up in slavery in Egypt. Slavery is all they have ever known and the abusive and brutal treatment that goes with it. They have been treated as nobodies – as losers – and have had no control over their lives or destiny. But now they have been set free and are being led by Moses who, in turn, is being led by God.

Previously in the story, the Israelites had arrived at Mount Sinai where God had given them the Ten Commandments. Then come these words:

*When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."*

To put it mildly, they were scared witless in the presence of God.

After this encounter, Moses goes up the mountain to spend time with God and the time that he is away stretches to forty days and forty nights.

Now imagine you're one of those Israelites. You're in a barren, inhospitable place, dry and stony and stretching on and on as far as the eye can see. Your past history has not taught you to think for yourselves – indeed has drummed into you a kind of numbness for self-determination – and any Bear Grylls' survival videos are a long time in the future. Moses is the one you've been looking to and he's been gone for a

week ... two weeks ... three weeks ... four weeks ... five weeks – and surely, you think, after forty days he isn't going to be coming back. There's a scary environment out there and a scary God. You're feeling incredibly vulnerable. So what do you do? What happens next?

*When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'*

That's what prompts Aaron to make a golden image that we popularly know as the golden calf but the Hebrew word can mean a young bull up to about three years in age – an image meant to represent potency and power. After Aaron does this, everything in the story goes to pot. Clearly making the golden calf is a big mistake but why is it a big mistake? An obvious conclusion to jump to is that Aaron is abandoning the God of Moses - our God - and giving the Israelites a new God to follow but is that really what's going on?

*When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.' They rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.*

After making the golden image, Aaron declares a day of festival not to a new God but to the Lord and when, later, God is speaking to Moses, his charge against the Israelites is not that they have abandoned him but that they are worshipping the idol they have built.

Years ago, I heard someone explain it like this. With Moses seemingly gone and the people panicking, Aaron has to decide quickly what to do to steady the ship. Moses has been the people's point of contact with God. Now that has gone and Aaron needs something to reassure them of God's presence with them and that God is still on their side. What he does is to draw on his previous experience and almost all of that experience comes from having lived in Egypt. And, in Egypt, gods were represented by images – a falcon, a jackal, a crocodile etc. Seen like that, Aaron's actions may be wrong because God has literally just told them not to make any graven images but they are understandable as an attempt to give the Israelites something to focus on to help them realise that God is still there with them.

Similarly, as Christians we draw on a lifetime of previous experience as we live out our relationship with God. Some of that can be helpful but it isn't always so. Some of the experiences we've been through may have a detrimental effect on the way we approach things.

These are words from our New Testament reading and they are wonderful words. Jesus is saying that everyone is invited to experience God's goodness.

*Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.*

If that invitation strikes you as too good to be true, you're wrong. In fact, it's too good and too true not to be taken seriously. The invitation is held out to you and it's not based upon a sense of human worthiness. Everyone is invited in – the seemingly good and the seemingly bad. All you have to do is accept the invitation.

Yet, despite this, I still hear people, including good solid Christians, worrying they aren't worthy enough for God to really accept them. And usually it's because they are drawing from their previous life experience. Maybe like the Israelites in slavery you've been brutalised and abused in the past; left feeling worthless; a nobody; a loser; too insignificant to be taken seriously by God. Or you're consumed by guilt at things

you've done and question whether God could possibly forgive you. Believe you me, sometimes people can feel the greatest guilt at the slightest of things.

If you can identify with any of that, listen carefully. God is inviting EVERYONE to the banquet. Jesus has died so that you might be forgiven and so that literally NOTHING can stand as an obstacle between God and you. So stop worrying unnecessarily; accept the invitation and come and enjoy the feast in all its fullness.

## Prayer

**Lord God,** You liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and led them to freedom. We pray for all those who victims of modern slavery and for all those who experience exploitation of any kind. Set the captives free and bring them to life in all its fullness.

We pray for all those whose thinking is confused particularly as a result of past experiences. May your light shine into the murkiness of minds and lives, bringing clarity, truth, direction and above all an overwhelming experience of your love.

We pray for all those who presently do not know you – friends, neighbours, family members. May all that we do reinforce the attractiveness of your kingdom and the simplicity of your invitation. May your Spirit be at work in their minds, making sense of everything and drawing them towards you.

We bring situations before you and pray that your mighty love and mighty power may be worked out within them to bring answers that only you can bring.

- Healing for those sick or suffering;
- Peace for the troubled or bereaved;
- Joy for the sad and sorrowful;
- Hope for those who can see no hope;
- Resolution for the conflict areas of this world and in particular today we remember the situations in Israel/Palestine and in Ukraine;
- Strength for those standing firm under persecution, particularly for those persecuted because of their faith;
- Purpose and direction for those who feel that they lack it. **Amen**

## The Lord's Prayer

**Hymn:** StF 661 'Give me the Faith which can remove'

Listen on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhZCEaVJDW4>

*Give me the faith which can remove  
and sink the mountain to a plain;  
give me the childlike praying love,  
which longs to build thy house again;  
thy love, let it my heart o'er-power,  
and all my simple soul devour.*

*I would the precious time redeem,  
and longer live for this alone,  
to spend and to be spent for them  
who have not yet my Saviour known;  
fully on these my mission prove,  
and only breathe, to breathe thy love.  
My talents, gifts and graces, Lord,*

*into thy blessed hands receive,  
and let me live to preach thy word,  
and let me to thy glory live;  
my every sacred moment spend  
in publishing the sinner's Friend.*

*Enlarge, inflame and fill my heart  
with boundless charity divine,  
so shall I all my strength exert,  
and love them with a zeal like thine,  
and lead them to thy open side,  
the sheep for whom the Shepherd died*