

A life of Service



Opening Words:

Read the words of Psalm 14:

Hymn: StF 238 Lead us heavenly Father, lead us. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpkEeXWtWg0>

Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
through this world's tempestuous sea;
guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us
for your help is full and free,
here possessing every blessing
if our God our Father be.

Saviour, by your grace restore us -
all our weaknesses are plain;
you have lived on earth before us,

you have felt our grief and pain:
tempted, taunted, yet undaunted,
from the depths you rose again.

Spirit of our God, descending,
fill our hearts with holy peace;
love with every passion blending,
pleasure that can never cease:
thus provided, pardoned, guided,
ever shall our joys increase.

Prayers:

Creator God, who breathed the world into existence, who called men and women to lead your people in paths of righteousness, who spoke your word through prophets, who loved the world so much that you sent your only son, who showed us the way, the truth and the life through his ministry, we come, and we worship you. When all felt to be lost, you raised him from the dead and revealed your glory to the early Church. We cannot understand, but we who live centuries later worship believe and worship you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

God of love, you have led us into the ways of light, forgive us when we have chosen to walk in the darkness, forgive us for when we have not acted with love, when our words have hurt other and even when our thoughts have been impure. We pray that you will cleanse us through the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen

Faithful God, the strength of all who believe and the hope of those who doubt; may we, who have not seen, have faith and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing, who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Introduction:

During my last few weeks in the Ipswich Circuit, I confess to feeling somewhat bewildered. During the run up to the election, I watched avidly debates and panel programmes on television, and without being in the least bit party political, there is a part of me that sympathises with government for being faced by the challenges of the last few years. I cannot condone some of the decisions surrounding Brexit, the handling of the pandemic, the significant threat of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the cost-of-living crisis, the moral code of those in leadership roles, and when I hear the term "broken Britain" I feel quite depressed.

The last four years of my ministry in Ipswich have been some of the toughest during my time in ministry. Today is my final Sunday in the Circuit, preaching at Museum Street this morning, sharing in the Circuit Service later today and through this medium today, although I will be preparing a further printed/digital service for the end of August. My overriding reflection during the last four or five years is my complete dependence on God, when I find myself trying to fumble my way through the fog.

Hymn 289 StF When my love for Christ grows weak https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwEpY_MAmJ8

When my love to God grows weak,
When for deeper faith I seek,
Then in thought I go to thee,
Garden of Gethsemane.

There I walk amid the shades
While the lingering twilight fades

See that suffering, friendless One,
Weeping, praying there alone.

When my love for man grows weak,
When for stronger faith I seek,
Hill of Calvary, I go
To thy scenes of fear and woe.

There behold His agony,
Suffered on the bitter tree;
See His anguish, see His faith,
Love triumphant still in death.

Then to life I turn again,
Learning all the worth of pain,
Learning all the might that lies
In a full self-sacrifice.

Bible Reading: John 6: 1-21

Reflection:

Thinking back to the 1980's I seldom gave evangelism a moment's thought, why would I? We were fortunate enough to worship in large urban Church with several large family networks some with four and even five generations all in the Church. We had a good reputation in the area and new people would just turn up, there was no need to evangelise, we were successful! Indeed, more people would have caused a problem because there were plenty of Sundays when we were full to capacity and even had people on a rota as "ushers" whose job was to find spaces for late arrivals.

As the eighties came to an end, institutional Church in the western world recognised that Churches were haemorrhaging members at an alarming rate and if changes weren't made there was going to be nobody left. Our immediate response was to jazz up worship, we still used the organ, but supplemented it with a band, and drums! We built up a collection of acetates and projected the hymns expecting the word to get around that we certainly knew how to worship God in hip and trendy ways. People didn't exactly flock in and during the last forty years we have seen a steady decline across the country. What do we do?

I find our Bible reading today quite fascinating, undoubtedly, Jesus is the ultimate crowd puller, his teaching is so dynamic and engaging that people flock to hear him. In Methodism we see something of that repeated in Mr Wesley's ability to draw crowds and if we don't replicate that, we feel like failures, why can't we do like they did?

As the enormous crowd gathers around Jesus, his first concern is their basic human need, they have walked for miles and are surely hungry. His disciples seem to appreciate what he is saying but stand and scratch their heads, they are out in the middle of the country without a Morrisons in sight and besides it would cost a fortune to feed five thousand of them with even a bag of crisps each. Remarkably, what is impossible for the human mind to comprehend is straightforward and manageable for God. Jesus feeds their bodies, THEN he feeds their minds.

Over the years I have seen advertisements outside churches, gayly announcing to the world that we are a fun and exciting community who worship at 10:30am on a Sunday "come and join us!" we shout at passers-by, and nobody turns up. The thing is, that they have to do all the hard work, they have to come to us and once again we feel like failures if they don't flock in. I drive along the streets of Ipswich with thousands of houses, I have done the sums and if just ten per cent of the population attended church, our buildings would be bursting at the seams. But they don't come, for most people we are irrelevant.

Jesus got it right. The starting point for evangelism isn't jazzing up worship, it isn't going out and telling people that Jesus loves them, I don't think that it is trying to be so filled with the spirit that people think "I want a bit of what he's got" I increasingly believe that it is about meeting people in their time of need. There are two miracle stories in this passage from St Marks Gospel and they both talk about Jesus identifying the needs of the people and being there to help them.

One of the defining moments in the Covid Pandemic was when people started looking after one another, going shopping for each other and showing random acts of kindness: -

- *What did you do for others during that time?*
- *What do you do today to serve others?*
- *Where do you see God in random acts of kindness?*
- *Is this evangelism?*

A time of prayer

We pray for God's world.

As we pray for God's world, we are mindful that we have not been wise, loving stewards of it. We have been greedy and selfish, rather than focusing on beauty and wonder, and encouraging flourishing.

We pray for world rulers, that they would rule with truth and justice, mercy and grace and that they would remember

that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Jesus Christ.

Take a moment in silent prayer to pray for God's world and world rulers.

"The Lord hears our prayer". "Thanks be to God".

We pray for God's church.

We pray for the church worldwide, that we would unite in the common goal to worship and serve God together in a spirit of unity and holiness.

We pray for the church where we are and in a moment of quiet, we offer up to God our prayers for our church.

"The Lord hears our prayer". "Thanks be to God".

We take time now to pray for those who are known to us. We pray for those who are known to us that are going through times of trial that they would know God's peace and comfort. We pray for those going through times of joy, that they would know your love and not take this time for granted.

We pray also for ourselves, and I invite you to spend some time in prayer to God for yourself.

"The Lord hears our prayer". "Thanks be to God".

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father....

Hymn 517 StF Eternal Father, strong to save, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDjwUzUnNpU>

Eternal Father, strong to save,
whose arm restrains the restless wave,
who told the mighty ocean deep
its own appointed bounds to keep:
we cry, O God of majesty,
for those in peril on the sea.

O Christ, whose voice the waters heard
and hushed their raging at your word,
who walked across the surging deep
and in the storm lay calm in sleep:
we cry, O Lord of Galilee,
for those in peril on the sea.

Creator Spirit, by whose breath
were fashioned sea and sky and earth;
who made the stormy chaos cease
and gave us life and light and peace:
we cry, O Spirit strong and free,
for those in peril on the sea.

O Trinity of love and power,
preserve their lives in danger's hour;
from rock and tempest, flood and flame,
protect them by your holy name,
and to your glory let there be
glad hymns of praise from land and sea.

A prayer of blessing

As this time of worship ends, we ponder the words of the grace:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore. Amen.