



In this service we are using the readings from the Revised Common Lectionary for Saturday, 14th September – Holy Cross.

Call to Worship - Psalm 98:1-5 (Responsive)

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things; **his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.**
The Lord has made his salvation known **and revealed his righteousness to the nations.**
He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; **all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.**
Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; **make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing.**

Hymn STF111 - Lord of the boundless curves of space Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqK1Y6fqPo4>

Lord of the boundless curves of space
and time's deep mystery,
to your creative might we trace
all nature's energy.

You gave a growing consciousness,
first sown when time began,
with all our longing to progress,
discover, shape and plan.

Your mind conceived the galaxy,
each atom's secret planned,
and every age of history
your purpose, Lord, has spanned.

In Christ the living power of grace
to liberate and lead
lights up the future of our race
with mercy's crowning deed.

Your Spirit gave the living cell
its hidden, vital force:
the instincts which all life impel
derive from you, their source.

Lead us, whom love has made and sought,
to find, when planets fall,
that Omega of life and thought
where Christ is all in all.

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Verses 4-6 by Brian Wren (born 1936) © Stainer & Bell Ltd. All rights reserved. Administered by Oxford University Press.

Prayer

God eternal, God of the great mystery of unbreakable love, God of time, and of timelessness, We come in worship,
We come to adore.

Another year in our Methodist Connexion has begun... For children another year in school has begun...
For students another year of study and academic growth has begun or will begin soon...
We are forever marking new beginnings.

We thank you for all that is new, We thank you for being able to reset our agenda, We thank you for life in its fullness.
But we can forget our souls in the busy round. We can lose sight of you. We are here because you love us.

Loving God,

We praise and thank you that you love us in a way we cannot truly grasp, And that love was why your Son Jesus Christ died
on a cross for us, Securing the forgiveness of our sins and guaranteeing our freedom from the effects of our sin. We cannot
earn our forgiveness and our changed state, You are gracious to us despite ourselves and in your grace, you shower us
with blessings.

All this is because of what Jesus did for us on the cross, Central to our faith, Sense in the senselessness of our routines and
muddles, Source of our life.

We worship you God; awestruck we keep silence and focus on the perspective of heaven. Amen.

William Glasse

Lord's Prayer : Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Hymn 764 - We believe in God the Father Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGLVgA-y8qA>

We believe in God the Father,
God Almighty, by whose plan
earth and heaven sprang to being,
all created things began.

We believe in Christ the Saviour,
Son of God in human frame,
virgin-born, the child of Mary
upon whom the Spirit came.

Christ, who on the cross forsaken,
like a lamb to slaughter led,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
he descended to the dead.

We believe in Jesus risen,
heaven's King to rule and reign,
to the Father's side ascended
till as judge he comes again.

We believe in God the Spirit;
in one church, below, above:
saints of God in one communion,
one in holiness and love.

So by faith, our sins forgiven,
Christ our Saviour, Lord and friend,
we shall rise with him in glory
to the life that knows no end.

Timothy Dudley-Smith (born 1926) from the Apostles' Creed © administered by Oxford University Press in Europe (including UK and Ireland) and Africa, and by Hope Publishing Company in all other territories (including USA)

Reading - Numbers 21:4b-9 *The bronze snake*

They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go round Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!' Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

Reading - 1 Corinthians 1:18-24 *Christ crucified is God's power and wisdom*

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Reading - John 3:13-17

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.'

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Hymn H&P 427 - O lift us up, strong Son of God

O lift us up, strong Son of God;
Restore our fallen race;
We who have marred your image shall
Regain it through your grace.

The subtle serpent of our sin
Ensnares our helpless feet;
The lifted serpent of your health
Can make our souls complete.

And you, who came into the world
To take our human frame,

Did not condemn our fallen state,
But took away our shame.

Your law is holy, just and good;
But still we fail to do
All that your gracious words require
To keep us close to you.

So lift us up, strong Son of God,
Restore your fallen race;
We who have lost your image shall
Regain it through your grace.

Cyril G Hambly (1931-1999) © Successor to Cyril G Hambly

Sermon - Look and Learn (Numbers 21:8)

The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.'

Chapters eleven to twenty-five of the book of Numbers chart the cycle of rebellion and judgement of a fearful people looking back to hard times, forward to a promise and yet jaundiced by the experiences of the moment. Today we read of a problem with venomous snakes. Folk were being bitten and they prayed for relief from their slithering torturers. God decided not to remove the snakes but instead to provide a means of healing from the poison's effect.

Moses was told to make an image, just as God had told the people not to make images. The snake on the pole was to be their route to healing and in that moment prefigured the lifted body of Jesus on the Cross at calvary which also would provide healing. Torturing a human being was as wrong as making an image was wrong; both broke God's statutes and yet they are linked in the gracious theme of salvation.

Absurd is it not? Saint Paul saw it that way too, especially the latter case. In 1 Corinthians 1 he described it, the cross, as foolishness to the extent of turning on its head the wisdom of the world, making nonsense of human learning and tripping over the formulaic religiosity of the time, to leave Christ as the only source of sense. Christ whose cruel death should have led to repercussions offered, and offers still, not condemnation but salvation.

When I was at school the magazine 'Look and Learn' was popular. Published between 1962 and 1982, the weekly magazine was designed to give children like me a balance of education and entertainment. There was educational content, illustrations, comic strips and stories as well as a focus on British and World history. It would look dull beside the resources available to schoolchildren now but at the time some of us looked forward, once a week, to its arrival with the newspapers.

If you look, and enjoy looking, you will absorb some of what you are looking at. The snake in on its pole in the desert made the people focus on the one thing that mattered; they needed healing from snakebite poison, or they would die. The mechanism by which God delivered this miracle was not the point; you don't indulge in analysis when you are in extremis.

What had gone wrong is set out in four verses in Numbers 21, namely 4-7 inclusive.

- 4 – discouragement (thoughts)
- 5 – complaining (words)
- 6 – consequences (snakes)
- 7 – repentance (prayers)

Put like that, the Israelites were fast learners. It did not take long for them to recognise their mistaken attitude to their leader Moses, and their lack of trust in God who had been with them since they left Egypt.

This tale of poor behaviour and its consequences plays out in the lives of many of us. We have our moments when we cannot see our own good fortune or the company of our own God. We make mistakes and we must repent.

From this reflection on the human condition, we are catapulted into the bigger story of the grace of God that is the Gospel.

The snake on the pole provides an immediate link to the well-known verses of John 3, of which verse 16, so famous, is the heart of the Gospel: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.' Foolish, Paul wrote, and yet the only way of making sense of anything and the only way to put meaning into life.

In biblical thought snakes are not only detestable in themselves but also, they are symbolic of the Prince of Darkness. As Revelation puts it, 'the dragon, the ancient snake, who is the devil' (12:19 or 20:2). The vision of the end of all things sees that snake bound and made powerless.

Meanwhile, Moses was asked to do something; he promised physical healing, not eternal salvation, and yet the one was the precursor of the other because they are inseparable once mortality is put into perspective. Many people would die of the venom but not all had to die; God would keep alive those who did as he commanded, those who looked to the snake on the pole.

Both Saint John and Saint Paul agree that eternal life can be entered into in the present; there is a transition to life within life which is a mystery to those who think they are wise but available to those who cannot understand how it works but trust that it will work.

Look at the world now and learn...the special form of Jesus makes the impossible to be possible...to save it from the same intractable cycle of rebellion and judgement that played out in the wilderness, plays out in life now and will keep being played out until the ancient serpent is finally bound and time is no more.

An old hymn says, 'hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes; shine through the gloom and point me to the skies. Heaven's morning breaks, and earth vain shadows flee'. The shadows can be very dark. In the wilderness, shadowy thoughts discouraged the people, made them grumble, led to the snakes getting muddled up in their lives, but God sought to save them.

Why would God do that? That is the heart of the Gospel and the mystery of Grace. Stop worrying about how or why and rejoice that it happens: 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

All praise be to God, and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Hymn 355 - Jesus, lover of my soul

Watch on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5E_M44PoO4

Jesus, lover of my soul,
Let me to thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high;
Hide me, O my Saviour, hide,
Till the storm of life is past;
Safe into the haven guide,
O receive my soul at last!

Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in thee I find;
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint,
Heal the sick, and lead the blind.
Just and holy is thy name,
I am all unrighteousness;
False and full of sin I am,
Thou art full of truth and grace.

Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on thee;
Leave, ah, leave me not alone,
Still support and comfort me.
All my trust on thee is stayed,
All my help from thee I bring;
Cover my defenceless head
With the shadow of thy wing.

Plenteous grace with thee is found,
Grace to cover all my sin;
Let the healing streams abound,
Make and keep me pure within.
Thou of life the fountain art;
Freely let me take of thee;
Spring thou up within my heart,
Rise to all eternity.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Dedication Prayer

God of all bounty and all goodness, we bring our gifts as we offer ourselves, for the work of your church and we pray that your Spirit will fill us and enable us to serve you to your glory and the furtherance of your Kingdom on earth, Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Please use these as suits your situation. The first two prayers are taken from The Revised Common Lectionary and the third from The Church of Scotland website.

For the healing of the nations, O God, you raised up your Son on the wood of the cross and exalted him as the Lord of all creation. Grant that all who believe in him may have the gift of eternal life and share in the glory of your kingdom, where you live forever and ever. Amen.

In the cross our need meets God's redemption In confidence and hope, we bring the prayers of our hearts for the transformation of the church and the world.

Add your concerns, needs, thoughts and conclude with:

Accept our prayers, God of mercy, in union with Jesus the Christ, who offered his life for our salvation upon the wood of the cross and who now reigns with you in eternal glory forever and ever. **Amen.**

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Sun, shining low on the horizon, warming the shortening autumn days: gardens and parks become blazes of colour, trees and earth preparing to rest, rejuvenate, restore for next year. We give thanks for a season's gifts, welcome nourishment for body and soul, and acknowledge the movement of time in phases of life and death.

We pray for all those charged with creating change: change in attitude, understanding, priorities, intent. For political leaders to hold true to their calling as carers for our world: that all responsible for environmental decisions can see beyond immediate economic concerns, creating a vision for a shared world order, enabling an environment of hope and speak for Earth, for the burden of responsibility to be communal, and all harmful agendas to be shelved.

We lift up before God, the young, the vulnerable in every community, all in positions of trust. Remembering all who tend earth and animal, sustaining our existence through food, and those who nourish our emotional lives, in friendship, family, companionship, laughter, and joy, we give thanks.

We honour individuals who have shaped our patterns and understanding of worship: Saints, Martyrs and Mystics, whose insights we value, whose examples we honour.

We bring silent prayers of our own burdens, both those of love, and those which lie heavily upon our hearts ...

We pray for those who have died, that they may rise to eternal life, and that we may so live on earth that we are all prepared for meeting God in our lives. **Amen**

Closing prayer

Skies are shouting "Give God glory!" **Stones are shouting: "Don't keep silent!"**

Every creature, breathing, praising **In diverse abundance, warning:**

Much to hear and much to learn **By the grace of God, we hear them!** © The Church of Scotland, 2024. All Rights Reserved

Hymn 455 - All my hope on God is founded Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XXqnttNcVU>

All my hope on God is founded;
he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

Human pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray his trust;
what with care and toil we fashion,
tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom passing thought;
splendour, light, and life attend him,
beauty springeth out of nought.

Evermore
from his store
new-born worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty giver
bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth,
pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand
at his hand;
joy doth wait on his command.

Still from earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call
one and all
ye who follow shall not fall.

Joachim Neander (1650-1680) paraphrased Robert Bridges (1844-1930)

The Grace

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. Amen.