



Call to Worship - Psalm 67:1-3

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us – so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you.

Hymn - 125 - Praise and thanksgiving, Father we offer Watch on YouTube : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ef1as5GTI5k>

Praise and thanksgiving
Father, we offer,
for all things living
you have made good.
Harvest of sown fields,
fruits of the orchard,
hay from the mown fields,
blossom and wood.

Father, providing
Food for your children,
your wisdom guiding
teaches us share
one with another,
So that rejoicing
sister and brother
may know thy care.

Lord, bless the labour
We bring to serve you,
that with our neighbour
we may be fed.
Sowing or tilling,
we would work with you;
harvesting, milling,
for daily bread.

Then will thy blessing
reach every people;
each one confessing
your gracious hand.
When you are reigning
No one will hunger,
your love sustaining;
fruitful the land.

Albert Bayley (1901-1984) © Oxford University Press

Prayer : God, eternal and gracious one We are overjoyed to be free to worship. You bless us when we are alone And your grace is poured out when we are with others. You see us wherever we are, And we are awestruck by your never ceasing care. We are thankful for all we receive from you And glad that you have made us as we are. We confess that we sin, And in our independence, we drift from you. You have offered us freedom from sin if we are humble, We confess our sins and pray to know your pardon.

William Glasse

Dance and play

May grace tangle us up in the image of your face which is beyond our imagining. And your way which we stretch to grasp. May we speak words sweet with praise, Salty with truth, bright with courage. Not brining judgement but openness to change. May we coax juicy fruits out of ripe vines, Squash our spoils under the ticklish skin of our toes, Dance and play in the wine of your gifts.

Let us praise you, O God; Let us praise you. Let us. Amen.

Alex Clare-Young ©The United Reformed Church

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.

Introduction to theme - Kept away

There are two ways of using the phrase, 'kept away'. We may mean I was kept away, as in, prevented. We may mean I kept away, as in, I avoided. The two readings in this service look at subtler takes on this – a man who was kept away by disability and lack of faith, and a woman who might have been culturally different but was not going to be kept away. Both people see a big change because of an encounter with God and move from being 'on the back foot' to a position of security.

Hymn - 343 - All my days I will sing this song of gladness

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ze2Z-jkzTps>

All my days I will sing this song of gladness,
give my praise to the fountain of delights;
for in my helplessness You heard my cry,
and waves of mercy poured down on my life.

I will trust in the cross of my Redeemer,
I will sing of the blood that never fails,
of sins forgiven, of conscience cleansed,
of death defeated and life without end.

Stuart Townend. © 1998 Kingsway's Thankyou Music/Adm. by
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division of David C Cook, www.kingswayworship.co.uk

*Beautiful Saviour, Wonderful Counsellor,
clothed in majesty, Lord of history,
You're the Way, the Truth, the Life.
Star of the Morning, glorious in holiness,
You're the Risen One, heaven's Champion,
and You reign, You reign over all!*

I long to be where the praise is never-ending,
yearn to dwell where the glory never fades,
where countless worshippers will share one song,
and cries of 'worthy' will honour the Lamb!

Readings- Acts 16:9-15 and John 5:1-9

Hymn - 647 - God grant us words to speak

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cg6L4GI8TnM>

God grant us words to speak
When words are all we bear
To ease the pain that others feel
And show our loving care.

And grant us words to weave
An armour of the mind,
To keep us sane within the hurts
That torment humankind.

And help us lean upon
The only perfect Word,

Whose tears and anger showed his love
For sinners whom he cured.

Even upon the Cross
His thoughts amid death's strife
Were for the ones whose pain he healed
By words of love and life.

Now we may grasp that sign
That is above all speech,
And struggle through the pain we feel
To own the hope we teach.

Alan Luff (1928-2020) © Stainer & Bell Ltd

Sermon - On the back foot (John 5:7)

I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.

You may well be familiar with the saying, 'on the back foot'. It has its origin in cricket where it describes the batsman stepping onto the back foot to play a defensive shot. We use this idiomatically to illustrate being at a disadvantage. In our bible readings we have met two people, apparently in disadvantageous positions which, whether in reality or not, kept them away from the action they wanted to be a part of. The disabled man in the gospel reading draws our sympathy. To need to move quickly to get to the healing waters when surrounded by able bodied people is hard. Worse, he had no help. It is easy to see why he would have become disconsolate. What would you do? If you had friends you might ask for help, like asking for a lift to the surgery or the hospital – but not everyone does ask for help who could. Some of us can be fiercely independent; too independent for our own good.

But there is another subtler point too. Where do you go for the most effective help? If you are not sure what is wrong you need a general practitioner's diagnosis but if you know you have a specific condition you need a specialist, not an generalist to help you. The man at the pool believed in the healing properties of the water in the pool. His fixation was on getting into the water when it was stirred up. He was looking in the wrong place for his healing and he seems to have no support: why? Was he friendless through choice, was he impossible to help or just obnoxious? Who knows... The part of Macedonia referred to in the reading from Acts was heavily Roman. It was a popular retirement area for Roman soldiers amongst other things – the main point for us was that it had so small a Jewish population that there was no synagogue there. In circumstances like that the Jews improvised. A place of prayer was created outside the city by the river to enable the people who wanted to do so to gather for worship. We who worship in buildings that have been home

to worship for generations instinctively go there for our formal gatherings. Anything else is a special occasion or is making a point of some sort. Good Friday walks, Cenotaph remembrances are just two but others will come to mind. For a small religious community to be gathering by the river as its main base seems like being on the back foot. There must be things missing, There must be disadvantages.

A man cannot be healed because he cannot get at the water and a faithful community of the people of God worship as best as they may without the usual help of the sacred space many would consider vital. These are not ordinary miracle territory. The man in the gospel story shows no sign of knowing who Jesus is or overtly looking for him, or any other healer. He is doing what he does, focused on the waters which are thought to have healing properties. These are not ordinary miracle territory. The congregation by the Macedonian river is small, the place makeshift and the environment secular. Retired people and traders are comfortable and stand on their own. They do not look for God. These are not ordinary miracle territory. Perhaps not. God is not an ordinary miracle worker. He sees need and benefit not popularity and wow factor.

Jesus was in Jerusalem for a different reason. One of the major festivals was on. Passover, Pentecost or Tabernacles. Festival goers would have been used to the motley bunch of identity less poorly people always by the pool called Bethesda by the Sheep Gate. Jesus sees the man. 'Do you want to be healed?' The man is indifferent. No one helps me. I am always beaten. Always kept away from the water. The Macedonian scene features in a vision Paul had. For Paul the vision was a clear message from God, not from the people of Macedonia, specifically Philippi. Paul and the others, including Luke journeyed there. They went to Philippi. They found the place of Jewish worship. They engaged in conversation. An unlikely time and place and unlikely people.

Two miracles. : The man who was kept away was healed, showing the authority of Jesus and despite his fixation on the hopeless situation. No helpers and water with no more than healing properties. No desire, just reasons for failure. The people kept out of normal church are sought out, talked to and they respond. They are converted by the Lord meeting them through the words of Paul. Baptism and fellowship follow. There are points we can make about Lydia but leave it there. Where do we expect God to work? Whom do we expect God to meet?

We pray for the needs of people because we are shown by the example of the Apostles and Jesus that praying is what we do. But our readings today remind us that we should not only be looking at churches to host outcomes or Christians to be the beneficiaries of God's activity. If Jesus could spot and heal someone kept away, or send his Spirit on a group kept outside, what next? Could it be that the people on the back foot are those defending tradition and with limited expectation? There's a thought!

May the God of unexpected miracles be praised, Amen.

Hymn - 654 - The love of God comes close Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-7BraZNS8Y>

The love of God comes close
where stands an open door
to let the stranger in,
to mingle rich and poor:
the love of God is here to stay,
embracing those who walk his way.

The peace of God comes close
to those caught in the storm,
forgoing lives of ease
to ease the lives forlorn:
the peace of God is here to stay,
embracing those who walk his way.

The joy of God comes close
where faith encounters fears,
where heights and depths of life

are found through smiles and tears;
the joy of God is here to stay,
embracing those who walk his way.

The grace of God comes close
to those whose grace is spent,
when hearts are tired or sore
and hope is bruised or bent:
the grace of God is here to stay,
embracing those who walk his way.

The Son of God comes close
where people praise his name,
where bread and wine are blest
and shared, as when he came:
the Son of God is here to stay,
embracing those who walk his way.

Prayers of Intercession :

Creator God, who spoke into the fabric of the universe to weave a cloth of righteousness and sew a tapestry of faithfulness, dip the threads of our hearts into your love so that we absorb the colours of your justice. From the patchwork of our understanding, inspire us to stitch a tent of equity for all your people, to clothe in our love those in need or poverty, and bandage those suffering in body, mind, or spirit. In the name of Jesus, whose garment hem gave comfort and healing.

Carol Long, local preacher, Milton Keynes Circuit @ The Methodist Church

God, help us to see injustice where it is, Help us to arrest injustice where we can And give us the courage to be the ones Who refuse to make things worse by going with the flow.

We pray for the homeless, the hungry and the helpless, We pray for the ill, the disabled and the despairing. Show us what we have that we can share, Our things, feelings and faith.

We pray for the wider world, Its needs and disputes, politics and powers; We pray for international harmony, And local life that comes together in common cause.

We pray for your church, We whom you have called to be your workers and talkers. May we talk of good news and work well, That people are drawn to you and find your peace.

William Glasse

Jesus the questioner

One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, 'Do you want to get well?'

Lord Jesus, You are the questioner, Prodding our hearts and minds with your words. You are the one who sees our sickness and our need. You are the one who asks if we truly want to be made whole, To be healed of all that traps us.

Forgive us our excuses, our blaming of others for what we are. Forgive us our failures to see ourselves With the love with which you look on us. Forgive us our slowness to accept all you give.

Ask your probing questions. Take from us all that misguides and distorts. Speak your word of hope and challenge. Raise us to our feet to walk your way. Amen.

Terry Hinks @The United Reformed Church

Hymn - 502 - I know that my redeemer lives Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myT4k-HefhY>

I know that my Redeemer lives,
and ever prays for me;
a token of his love he gives,
a pledge of liberty.

Jesus, I hang upon your word;
I steadfastly believe
you will return and claim me, Lord,
and to yourself receive.

I find him lifting up my head,
he brings salvation near,
his presence makes me free indeed,
and he will soon appear.

Your love I soon expect to find
in all its depth and height,
to comprehend the eternal mind,
and grasp the Infinite.

He wills that I should holy be;
what can withstand his will?
The counsel of his grace in me
he surely shall fulfil.

When God is mine, and I am his,
of paradise possessed,
I taste unutterable bliss
and everlasting rest.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Dismissal : Gracious God, through a vision you sent forth Paul to preach the gospel and called the women to the place of prayer on the Sabbath. Grant that we may be like Paul and be found like Lydia, our hearts responsive to your word and open to go where you lead us. Amen.

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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.