



Call to Worship - Psalm 31:15-16 : My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

Hymn - STF677 - Christ is made the sure foundation

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR9NHXnbxIU>

Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and corner-stone,
chosen of the Lord, and precious,
binding all the Church in one,
holy Zion's help for ever,
and her confidence alone.

Here vouchsafe to all thy servants
what they ask of thee to gain,
what they gain from thee for ever
with the blessed to retain,
and hereafter in thy glory
evermore with thee to reign.

To this temple, where we call thee,
come, O Lord of hosts, today;
with thy constant loving-kindness
hear thy servants as they pray;
and thy fullest benediction
shed within its walls always.

Praise and honour to the Father,
praise and honour to the Son,
praise and honour to the Spirit,
ever Three, and ever One,
consubstantial, co-eternal,
while unending ages run.

7th or 8th Century translated by John M Neale (1818-1866)

Prayer : Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Timeless and immortal, We worship you, we give you thanks, We praise you for your glory.

Your glory, Lord, is everywhere, Your glory inspires our deepest thoughts, The sense of your omnipotence gives us courage and feeds faith.

You are in our lives, We try to take control of what we do while we acknowledge that the big picture, our ultimate destiny is in you and with you.

God of resurrection, God of empty tomb and morning light, God of dewy garden, walk with us as we go our way today.

The evidence of your touch is patent, thank you for your nearness, your obvious love, Your wonderful humanity, and your parental love.

We confess our sins of neglect, when we devalue your glory for ourselves by trying to understand too much and believing too little.

We repent and pray, for the total forgiveness of the cross, sealed in blood and proved in empty tomb, that it may fill our whole selves.

We worship you as your Church, we are your family and together, we pray for discernment of truth, such grasp of meaning as we need.

Make us, God of glory, what you would have us be; work with us, Jesus Christ, to be you to those around us.

Lord's Prayer : 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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and forever Amen.

Introduction to theme - The Glory of God

Today we read two passages which take us into an area of life and faith we may prefer to avoid thinking about.

Stephen irritated the establishment faith leaders and he was stoned to death for what may be seen as intransigence, but what is better seen as making a stand for freedom of belief and expression.

Saint John recorded Jesus talking about his future in another place. Thomas and Philip asked questions. Jesus implied that they were not hearing what he was really saying and the consequence is a passage that we have come to use as a source of comfort in bereavement as it gives us a glimpse of a longer perspective than is afforded us by anything mortal.

Hymn - STF563 - O Jesus, I have promised

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrooaJ56dvc>

O Jesus, I have promised to serve you to the end; Lord, be for ever near me, my master and my friend; I shall not fear the battle if you are by my side, nor wander from the pathway if you will be my guide.	the tempting sounds I hear; my foes are ever near me, around me, and within; but, Jesus, now draw nearer, and shield my soul from sin.	Lord, speak, and make me listen, O guardian of my soul.
O let me feel you near me; the world is ever near; I see the sights that dazzle,	O let me hear you speaking in accents clear and still, above the storms of passion, the murmurs of self-will; O speak to reassure me, to hasten or control;	O Jesus, you have promised to all who follow you, that where you are in glory your servant shall be too; and, Jesus, I have promised to serve you to the end; O give me grace to follow my master and my friend.

John E Bode (1816-1874)

Reading - Acts 7:55-60 : But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

Reading - John 14:1-14 : 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.'

Hymn - STF349 - I am not skilled to understand

Watch on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6NKnUh8EB4

I am not skilled to understand
what God has willed, what God has planned;
I only know at his right hand
stands one who is my Saviour.

my Saviour's always there for me.
My God he was, my God he is,
my God he's always gonna be.
(Repeat)

I take him at his word and deed,
Christ died to save me this I read,
and in my heart I find a need
for him to be my Saviour.

Yes, living, dying, let me bring
my strength, my solace from this spring,
that he who lives to be my King
once died to be my Saviour.
Chorus

That he would leave his place on high
and come for sinful man to die.
You count it strange, so once did I,
before I knew my Saviour.

That he would leave his place on high
and come for sinful man to die.
You count it strange, so once did I,
before I knew my Saviour.

My Saviour loves, my Saviour lives,

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Sermon - Knowing the way (Acts 7:56)

'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'

Stephen was in a terrible position. He was being stoned to death by a brutal and enraged group of people who, seemingly, felt threatened because of the way he spoke to them. He had unpacked Jewish history in defence of his faith in Jesus Christ. He rounded off his speech by stating that they were stiff-necked people who resisted the Holy Spirit.

The brutal stoning was the outcome of what the Sanhedrin saw as guilt in a charge of blaspheming against a holy place. The backstory makes a fascinating read. What happened next was extraordinary.

Stephen had a clear view of heaven and Jesus, which he immediately spoke of. There was Jesus, standing beside God as if to watch proceedings and welcome his faithful servant at the moment of mortal death.

It was not unusual for a judge to stand to deliver a verdict – we may infer from this that it is Stephen's accusers who are on trial before the court of heaven, even as they tried him.

We can only start to imagine the terror in Stephen's heart as the stones flew at him. Can we even begin grasp how he must have felt when he then saw something which in ordinary circumstances might have been dismissed as a hallucination?

It is in these unlikely circumstances I find the practical outworking of the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel and that drives a big question for me, and I suggest, for many of us.

Do I have the clarity in my faith that would let me link seamlessly the prophesy of Daniel, the teaching of Jesus and my mortality?

Do I know where I am going?

Do you?

In Daniel 7:13-14 we are given a vision of 'The Ancient of Days'. Much of the rhetoric is the normal expression of faith in God's power and sovereignty that we come to expect to read of, but the vital take-away in today's context is the indestructibility of God's Kingdom.

Stephen puts a different spin on that indestructibility and makes it all the more real and exciting.

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

Wow; that is enormous. It is what moves our faith from being another interest group to dabble with into a never to be missed Life Insurance Policy.

So, we come back to the questions that Thomas and Philip asked – what is the way and can we see the Father?

Stephen saw the Father and the way was clear – it meant holding to faith despite everything life may do.

I am a reasonable map reader, both on the road or on foot. I make mistakes but I have a sufficiently well-developed sense of direction to know when I have made an error and how to put it right.

But that is not the sort of way we mean, is it.

Perhaps a better illustration is a recipe. When we set out to cook, we need list of ingredients and we need a method for assembling them. Indeed, the method may be as important as then list of ingredients and doing things in the wrong order or at the wrong speed can lead to great disappointment.

All five of the hymns I have suggested for this service have lines in them referring to the challenges of life, the pain of parting at death and the assurance of a saviour. For them to come to life for us, as with so much of the imagery in our hymns and songs, we do not need to know whether to turn right or left, but to have grasped the method of arriving with God.

Jesus told Philip that to see him was to see the Father. In other words, whilst they worried about seeing God in the future, the truth was they had seen a form of him already.

Do we overlook the things we know and have seen, the blessings we have experienced already in our anxiety to have certainty about moments that are in the future anyway?

Is it the case that when Stephen most needed God, it was God who appeared to him, and not he who went looking.

For that to be our blessing too we need to worry less about directions, signposts and certainties but more about understanding the nature and presence of God all around us now.

The ancient 7th Century poem translated by John Mason Neale pinned down the certainty we need:

‘And, hereafter, in thy glory, evermore with thee to reign.’ Amen

Hymn - STF734 - Going home, moving on

Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jK--PI5Lmwk>

Going home, moving on,
through God's open door;
hush, my soul, have no fear,
Christ has gone before.
Parting hurts, love protests,
pain is not denied;
yet, in Christ, life and hope
span the great divide.
Going home, moving on,
through God's open door;
hush, my soul, have no fear,
Christ has gone before,
Christ has gone before.

No more guilt, no more fear,
all the past is healed:
broken dreams now restored,
perfect grace revealed.
Christ has died, Christ is risen,
Christ will come again:
death destroyed, life restored,
love alone shall reign.
Going home, moving on,
through God's open door;
hush, my soul, have no fear,
Christ has gone before,
Christ has gone before.

Michael L Forster (born 1946) © 1999 Kevin Mayhew Ltd.

Dedication of Offering : Lord, we bring our gifts in cash, We give our gifts digitally, We bring our tangible actions We offer the abilities we have. May all be blessed in the work of your Church, For Jesus's sake. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Almighty God and Father, we have read astonishing things today and as we try to embrace their meaning in our living and believing, we pray that you will help us on our course. We grapple with the indeterminable subjects of life and immortality and we know that we struggle to stop looking further than we can see into an invisible future.

As we pray for ourselves, we are praying that you will be gentle with us while helping us move to a better place in our understanding and in our subconscious believing. Help us to develop the spiritual muscle memory that we need to know the way to see you without needing to learn every conceivable direction. Silence

In these hopeful days of Easter, we continue to live in the afterglow of the resurrection and with all that we are we ask that your Holy Spirit will be with us to enable us to grow into what you would make us in the way and at the time you know to be right for us.

You know us better than we know ourselves; Lord, bless us. Silence

Sisters and brothers in Christ, God invites us to bring our doubts and fears, our joys and concerns, our petitions and praise, and offer them for the earth and all its creatures.

We pray for the world around us, The earth we exploit in our misunderstanding of true value, The society we have built and the life that sustains us. We bring to you the effects of climate change, Like children who know they have done wrong but not how to fix it, We look for your guidance and wisdom. Silence

We pray for the harm done by war, In Eastern Europe, In the Middle East, In Sudan, And wherever else there is conflict. Be with broken people, And give consciences to the people breakers, Grace to leaders And good sense to all that the world in pain may turn to love. Silence

We pray for healing for poorly people, For bravery for those who know they are sick and await diagnosis, For comfort for those who are dying. Lord, give to us all patience, Care and concern to love the lonely, Unquestioning generosity to support the needy, and our own sense of concern to see need where it is. Silence

Receive these prayers, O God, and transform us through them, that we may have eyes to see and hearts to understand not only what you do on our behalf, but what you call us to do so that your realm will come to fruition in glory. Pause

Risen Lord, In this glorious season, we lift our hearts in gratitude and praise. You have rolled away the stone of despair, and filled the world with the light of hope. Bless Your Church, O Christ, that we may be bold in proclaiming Your resurrection, faithful in serving the least among us, and united in love that reflects Your kingdom. Renew our spirits with the joy of Easter, so that in every word and deed, we may bear witness to the life You have won for all. In Your victorious name we pray, Amen.

Hymn - STF456 - And are we yet alive

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

And are we yet alive, And see each other's face? Glory and praise to Jesus give For his redeeming grace!	within, Since we assembled last! But out of all the Lord Hath brought us by his love; And still he doth his help afford, And hides our life above.	Let us take up the cross, Till we the crown obtain; And gladly reckon all things loss, So we may Jesus gain.
Preserved by power divine To full salvation here, Again in Jesu's praise we join, And in his sight appear.	Then let us make our boast Of his redeeming power, Which saves us to the uttermost, Till we can sin no more.	Praise ye the Lord, alleluia! Praise ye the Lord, alleluia! Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, Praise ye the Lord!
What troubles have we seen, What conflicts have we passed, Fighting without, and fears		Charles Wesley (1707-1788) SM (with Alleluias)

Dismissal : Teach us, O God, to trust your providence, ordered and sure; to accept your wisdom, unerring and true and to rejoice in your love unbounded and eternal; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Charles Simeon (1759-1836) © The Methodist Church

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.