

Order of Service 22nd May 2022

Sacred Spaces

Welcome

Hello and welcome to Hearsall at Home for 22nd May 2022. Our theme today is sacred spaces. Let's dedicate this hour of worship as sacred space together now.

Call to Worship (BPW 81)

This is the Place

And this is the time;

Here and now,

God waits

To break into our experience;

to change our minds,

to change our lives;

to change our ways;

To make us see the world

And the whole of life

In a new light;

to fill us with hope,

joy and certainty

for the future.

This is the place

As are all places,

This is the time

As are all times.

Here and now

let us praise God.

In sacred space we worship. Let's sing the hymn, *Come worship God*.

Hymn (BPW 36) **Come Worship God**

Come, worship God who is worthy of honour,
enter his presence with thanks and a song!
He is the rock of his people's salvation,
to whom our jubilant praises belong.

Ruled by his might are the heights of the mountains,
held in his hands are the depths of the earth;
his is the sea, his the land, for he made them,
King above all gods, who gave us our birth.

We are his people, the sheep of his pasture;
he is our maker, and to him we pray.
Gladly we kneel in obedience before him;
great is the God whom we worship this day!

Now let us listen, for God speaks among us,
open our hearts and receive what he says:
peace be to all who remember his goodness,
trust in his word and rejoice in his ways!

Congregational Reading (Psalm 84)

- 1 How lovely is your dwelling place,
 Lord Almighty!
- 2 My soul yearns, even faints,
 for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out
 for the living God.
- 3 Even the sparrow has found a home,
 and the swallow a nest for herself,
 where she may have her young—
a place near your altar,
 Lord Almighty, my King and my God.
- 4 Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
 they are ever praising you.
- 5 Blessed are those whose strength is in you,

whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

6 As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

7 They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.

8 Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.

9 Look on our shield, O God;
look with favour on your anointed one.

10 Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere;

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

11 For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
the Lord bestows favour and honour;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose walk is blameless.

12 Lord Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you.

We share in the words of the Lord's Prayer.

The 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 for ever.
Amen.

Song (WT 195) **I Will Offer Up My Life**

Verse 1

I will offer up my life
In spirit and truth,
Pouring out the oil of love
As my worship to You.
In surrender, I must give my every part;
Lord, receive the sacrifice
Of a broken heart.

Chorus

*Jesus, what can I give, what can I bring
To so faithful a friend, to so loving a King?
Saviour, what can be said, what can be sung
As a praise of Your name
For the things You have done?
Oh, my words could not tell, not even in part
Of the debt of love that is owed
By this thankful heart.*

Verse 2

You deserve my every breath,
For You've paid the great cost,
Giving up Your life to death,
Even death on a cross.
You took all my shame away
There, defeated my sin,
Opened up the gates of heaven
And have beckoned me in.

Chorus x 2

Offering

“Praise be to you, Lord,
the God of our father Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.
Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power
and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.
Yours, Lord, is the kingdom;
you are exalted as head over all.
Wealth and honour come from you;
you are the ruler of all things.
In your hands are strength and power
to exalt and give strength to all.
Now, our God, we give you thanks,
and praise your glorious name.

“But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.”

Our prayers of intercession this week are led by Anne Thompson.

Prayers of Intercession

Dear Father God, in whom we place our trust, we bring these prayers to you now, for our planet, our world, our country, our city, our church and our families and friends, and also ourselves.

We thank you, Lord, for the beautiful flowers and blossom of spring. We also thank you for the baby animals born at this time of year. It brings us joy to see new life being born and new plants springing up afresh.

We pray for the future of our planet Earth, with all the many problems facing its future. These include the effects of global warming, which cause most distress and more problems for the peoples of the world least able to survive them. We fear species becoming extinct and we long to be able to reverse the tragic effects that

man's activity has had on our planet. Help us all to play our part in this huge task and help us not to be hesitant in doing so.

We pray for all the countries of the world where there is war and unrest. There are so many, Lord. David read out a long list of them in his prayers last week. We long for them to have peace but we find it hard to understand why this could be so difficult to achieve. We pray especially for the situation in Ukraine and for all those forced to flee their homes and their country, and possibly leaving behind their menfolk to fight.

We pray for our government, and hope that we will be able to regain our trust in them and hope that they will lead us wisely and honestly. We pray for all our councils and the newly and re-elected members of them. May they be honest and have integrity and a will to do their best for the people they represent.

We pray for our city as its year of being City of Culture comes to a close. We hope that people are able to enjoy all the special events that are being laid on for these last few weeks. We thank you for all the people who have been involved in it over the last year.

Father, we especially pray for the future of our church and the Minister and Trustees who seek to run it well and try and fit the legal and practical obligations in with being welcoming and helpful to our communities. We pray for all those who run groups, are involved in worship or pastoral care or who look after the buildings. We pray for our Minister David as he approaches the time of his wedding to Leonie.

We think of those known to us who need our prayers, maybe they have been bereaved, are ill, or had accidents or who are waiting for treatment or results. We also pray for those who are struggling with other issues in their lives.

We ask all these things in the name of Jesus Christ, your beloved son.

Amen.

Many thanks Anne for those prayers. We hear now our Bible readings from 1 Kings and from Ephesians.

Bible Readings

1 Kings 8: 1 - 13

The ark brought to the temple

8 Then King Solomon summoned into his presence at Jerusalem the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families, to bring up the ark of the LORD's covenant from Zion, the City of David. ² All the Israelites came together to King Solomon at the time of the festival in the month of Ethanim, the seventh month.

³ When all the elders of Israel had arrived, the priests took up the ark, ⁴ and they brought up the ark of the LORD and the tent of meeting and all the sacred furnishings in it. The priests and Levites carried them up, ⁵ and King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted.

⁶ The priests then brought the ark of the LORD's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim. ⁷ The cherubim spread their wings over the place of the ark and overshadowed the ark and its carrying poles. ⁸ These poles were so long that their ends could be seen from the Holy Place in front of the inner sanctuary, but not from outside the Holy Place; and they are still there today. ⁹ There was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb, where the LORD made a covenant with the Israelites after they came out of Egypt.

¹⁰ When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. ¹¹ And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple.

¹² Then Solomon said, 'The LORD has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud; ¹³ I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell for ever.'

Ephesians 2: 11 - 22

Jew and Gentile reconciled through Christ

¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (which is done in the

body by human hands) – ¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Our next song, specially written for this service, explores the theme of Sacred Space.

Song **Holy Ground** (Music Prue / Words Sutcliffe)

Verse 1

In my special places
I sometimes get a sense that he is close;
In familiar structures
I often feel his love within the stones;
Or out on misty hillsides
I hear him in an eagle's lonely cry;
Or with my dearest friends
I'll catch him in a laugh or in a sigh.

Chorus 1

*So my friends be careful where you tread
This place might not seem so very much to you
But this is holy ground
This is holy ground
My sacred space is here and everywhere
So still your busy heart
For this is holy ground
This is holy ground.*

Verse 2

The very earth is sacred
And everything there is belongs to him
And everywhere are holy mountains,
Birds and stars adore him too
Yet he knows my heart
How i need a place for he and I to meet
So here I rest before him
In my sacred space he makes my soul complete.

Chorus 2

*So now my Lord I sink beneath your gaze
And worship you in spirit and in truth
For this is holy ground
This is holy ground.
Your sacred space is here and everywhere
I drop all my pretence
For this is holy ground
This is holy ground.*

Prayer

Lord, in this holy ground, may we hear your voice speaking to each one of us. Amen.

Sermon

Sacred Spaces

I have been quite busy recently and it's easy in such times for us to neglect life-giving spiritual discipline. One morning a couple of weeks ago I was catching a train from Cheltenham Spa to Birmingham New Street. The previous train had been cancelled so there were hordes of people all intent on boarding "my" train.

I ended up standing with three other people in the space at the end of a coach. It was the Edinburgh train, and there were no stops before Birmingham, so I had three quarters of an hour to stand in this jostling, crowded space, trying to keep my balance. A young woman crouched on the floor and worked on some text on her phone. Either side of me a man and a woman stood, looking out the window nearest to them.

I had a choice. I could give into a grumbling mentality in which I might entertain thoughts about the inadequacy of our fragmentary railway system, or I could embrace this space, **this space, here and now**, in which I had nothing to do, as a sacred space. By the grace of God I chose the latter, and for much of the journey I was using the rhythm of my breath and the rhythm of the train to call me back into the deeply sensed presence of the God who is love.

Also, I prayed for the people on the carriage, and especially for a young mum who had to make her way through the crowded train to take her child to the toilet. That was tricky: all I had to do was stand around; but she delicately picked her way, a toddler on her hips, through the hazards of sliding doors, suitcases and people, as the train jostled its way through Worcestershire.

For me, this noisy, crowded and uncomfortable place became a sacred space. I find that what detracts from a sense of the sacred for me is being over busy. Unless it's very cold or very hot, the nature of the space is quite irrelevant to me.

Moses encountered God in a burning bush and on a mountain top. Abraham met God outside his tent at Mamre. Mary met God's angel in a domestic setting. Jacob met him at night by the Jabbok river. John met Christ whilst exiled on the island of Patmos. Hannah met God in the shrine at Shiloh. David met him dancing on the

Jerusalem road. Saul met him on the Damascus road. Isaiah met him in the temple. Elijah met him as he peeped from a cave on mount Horeb, not in the earthquake, wind or fire but in a still small voice.

Sometimes people met with God in structures specifically designed as sacred spaces. The tabernacle, as a sort of portable temple, was carried with the children of Israel in their desert wanderings. The tabernacle became fixed as a shrine at Shiloh and eventually became a more permanent structure. There the prophet Samuel began his awesome ministry.

The dream of building a great temple - a great sacred space - for God to be worshipped had grown. King David wanted to build it, but he was a man of war, and was not authorised by God for this project. His son Solomon commissioned the great temple, and our reading came from the time when the ark of the covenant was placed in the inner sanctuary, the holy of holies, of the new Temple. And we heard that extraordinary tradition of the temple being filled with a thick cloud - a symbol of the glory and majesty and presence of the awesome God in this brand-new sacred space.

Depending on how you count, one or two further temples were built. Solomon's temple was completed in 957 BCE but fell into disrepair and was rebuilt by Ezra some four and a half centuries after Solomon's was completed, in 515 BCE. Then, after this temple, Herod began funding the building of a renovated temple in 20BCE - so about 16 years before Jesus.

When Jesus wandered around Herod's temple, it would have been a new building, completed in Jesus' lifetime. It was whilst in that Temple that he said that, if the Temple were destroyed he could rebuild it in three days. But, the gospel writers tell us, the Temple he referred to was the Temple of his own body.

This seems a startling turn around if we stop to think about it. Great buildings as sacred spaces for sacrifices, prayer and worship were being replaced by Jesus' body. What on earth could that mean?

At one level, it was a reference to the regular practice of animal sacrifice to atone for sin. Now, Jesus' own body would be offered, a once-and-for-all perfect sacrifice,

rendering the core Temple business of repeated animal sacrifice redundant.

The unknown author of the book of Hebrews argues that the earthly sacred spaces were models of an underlying heavenly reality. And Christ came as the great High Priest offering **himself** as a perfect sacrifice:

Such a high priest [Jesus Christ] truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever. Hebrews 7: 26 - 28

So, for Christians, the sacred space par excellence became the body of Jesus. But this notion of the body of Jesus as a Temple also carried with it everything that follows from Jesus' embodiment on the earth. The Word of God became flesh and **tabernacled** among us. As I have said on other occasions, that's the underlying language that's used for *made his dwelling* in that pivotal verse, John 1:14:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

In his body God was among us. I suppose one implication of this is that God can join us in our regular, ordinary 24/7 lives and all across the world. The human condition can be a seat for the presence of God.

And so it's well known that Christians didn't have their own sacred spaces for two or three hundred years. The early Jerusalem Christians prayed in the Temple; elsewhere they might have met in synagogues until they were expelled. Then they might meet outside, but they often met in private homes. We read this in Paul's letter to Philemon:

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

That phrase “The church that meets in your home” is very telling. The church is clearly **not** a building, but a community of people. It meets together, not in the church, for they themselves **are** the church. It meets in someone’s home. The same thought is found at the start of Romans 16, where Paul sends greetings to the church that meets in the house of Priscilla and Aquila.

Our reading from Ephesians 2 develops the theme of the church being very different from a building. There we are told that Christ himself was the peace between the previously opposed factions of Jew and Gentile. He brings them together into one harmonious community and the text adds:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

The church, the community, is the dwelling place, the sacred space, where God’s Spirit may be found, as they forgive one another and learn to live in peace. The theology can be easily sketched out. Since Jesus has ascended to heaven, his body is now our bodies, the church, the community of people. So, if Jesus had suggested his body was the temple that could be rebuilt in a mere three days, now Christ trusts his embodiment to that community. As the centuries pass the legacy on, we may conclude we, along with Christians across the planet, are the body of Christ. We, as a group of people, are the Temple. We are the sacred space. His dwelling place is not in some tucked-away special building but in the lives and loves of Christian people. The sacred space is you and me walking in grace and truth together.

I remember hearing of a stunning opening line to a modern sermon that went like this.

*I don’t want you to come to church;
I want you to **be** the church.*

* * *

The earliest bricks-and-mortar **building** that has been identified as a place of Christian worship was in Syria. It was probably a house converted for use as Christian worship, and this conversion dated to between 233 and 256 CE. It had its own baptistry and above the baptistry the ceiling was painted dark blue and peppered with stars. The walls included a painting of Christ as the Good Shepherd. According to Wikipedia, it may have been destroyed by Isis.

So, it was probably a couple of centuries before Christian faith began to get set in stone - fixed into bricks and mortar. Before then, churches met wherever they could.

Now in cold and wet climates like ours, we need buildings! But the reason we have sacred Christian buildings is surely more profound. It's one thing to say we can worship Christ on a train or in someone's lounge, but many of us find it invaluable to enter a place that's dedicated to prayer, worship and reflection. Something about the space, the buildings, the atmosphere encodes our spirituality. However much we espouse the New Testament view that the church is always the people and never a building, dedicated sacred spaces can perform a mysterious function in lives.

As I was preparing this address, I received the daily email from Father Richard Rohr, and it seemed pertinent. He writes:

German scholar Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943) studied sacred images and their relationship to spirituality. He said, “The best things can’t be told: the second-best are misunderstood.” So, we settle for talking about the “third-best things,” which, in my culture, (says Richard Rohr) I suppose are things like sports, television, the weather, and other safe topics.

The best things can’t be talked about—they can only be experienced. And then if we try to talk about them, we know that we see “through a glass darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Our best attempts will still be merely stammering, grasping for good-enough words. But one of the great difficulties of theology and spirituality is that its subject matter is precisely those “best things” that cannot be talked about....

The second-best things which, according to Zimmer, “are misunderstood,” are those things that merely point to the first-best things. These belong to philosophy, theology, psychology, art, and poetry, all of which—like sacred Scripture—are so easily

misunderstood. Yet what I have tried to do in my work says Richard Rohr is to use those second-best things that point to and clarify the first-best things. What else can we do? All our words, beliefs, and rituals are merely “fingers pointing to the moon.”

AND we must never confuse the finger with the moon, I add. Sacred spaces are like those second-best things. Like fingers pointing to the moon, they point beyond themselves to the unspeakably wondrous first-best things. Through architecture, symbols and shared memory, they offer the possibility of accessing the first best things - the direct experience of God, which cannot be reduced to words or symbols or songs or buildings or any other human product.

* * *

So, some things to ponder. Do you have sacred spaces in your life? Sacred spaces can be walks, bicycle rides, garden seats, woods, rivers, chapels, cathedrals, prayer rooms or many more places. An armchair used for prayer; a morning habit of reading the Bible; an annual retreat; a weekly study group; all these can be sacred spaces. What are your sacred spaces? Which spaces help you to get a taste of those “first best things” - the ineffable presence of the divine?

You might have several sacred spaces. If so, when did you last spend time in them? Are there steps you can take to guard them from desecration?

If you have no sacred spaces, might it be good to create one? What “second best things” could point you to the first best things? Candles, icons, music, flowers, fragrances...

Finally, our own building. I liked it when we regularly opened the chapel as a sacred space for passers-by, though only a few took advantage. Perhaps it's time to reopen it, though we might need to reinforce security on our inner doors.

And then, **this** space, which we all perceive differently from each other. This space for Sunday worship. If you listen to the podcast, where do you listen? Is that becoming a sacred space for you? Do you always listen at the same time? Could you enter that space or that time more frequently than once a week?

And, if you sometimes come to our church building in Queensland Avenue, or to another church, what is it about that space that makes it sacred? Are there things

that spoil its sacredness in your mind? Might others see that differently from you? How can we make it a sacred space all can share? Can two churches, or even two religions, share the same sacred space? What might we do to enhance our own sacred space?

We confirm our desire to follow Jesus in our closing hymn.

Hymn (BPW 352) **O Jesus I have promised**

O Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end:
be now and 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.

O let me feel you near me!
The world is ever near;
I see the sights that dazzle,
the tempting sounds I hear;
my foes are ever near me,
around me and within;
but Jesus, draw still nearer,
and shield my soul from sin.

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 speak, and make me listen,
O guardian of my soul.

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.

O let me see your footmarks
and in them plant my own;
my hope to follow truly
is in your strength alone.
O guide me, call me, draw me,
uphold me to the end,
and then in heaven receive me,
my Saviour and my friend!

The Grace

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

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
Wherever he may send you;
May he guide you through the wilderness;
Protect you through the storm;
May he bring you home rejoicing
At the wonders he has shown you;
May he bring you home rejoicing
Once again into our doors.