

Order of Service 29th May 2022

Authentic Witness in the 21st Century

Welcome

Hello everyone and thanks for sharing in our worship today. It's a rapidly changing world and so I've prepared a reflection on how we can be authentic witnesses to Christ, even as our world keeps on changing.

Let's still ourselves as we come to worship.

Call to Worship

- 1 The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty;
the Lord is robed in majesty and armed with strength;
indeed, the world is established, firm and secure.
- 2 Your throne was established long ago;
you are from all eternity.
- 3 The seas have lifted up, Lord,
the seas have lifted up their voice;
the seas have lifted up their pounding waves.
- 4 Mightier than the thunder of the great waters,
mightier than the breakers of the sea—
the Lord on high is mighty.
- 5 Your statutes, Lord, stand firm;
holiness adorns your house
for endless days.

Psalm 93

Hymn (BPW 5) **Be Still for the Presence of the Lord**

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the holy One, is here.
Come bow before him now with reverence and fear.
In him no sin is found; we stand on holy ground.
Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the holy One, is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around;
He burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned.
How awesome is the sight; our radiant King of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.
He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace.
No work too hard for Him. In faith receive from him.
Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.

Some years ago, I came across a song called *the Deer's Cry* based on the prayer known as St Patrick's Breastplate. The song was written by Shaun Davey, and it's well-known as sung by Rita Connolly. I'd recommend looking up the song online, but here I will simply use the words as a prayer.

Prayer

I arise today through the strength of heaven,
Light of sun, radiance of moon,
Splendour of fire, speed of lightning,
Swiftness of wind, depth of the sea,
Stability of earth, firmness of rock.
I arise today through God's strength to pilot me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me
From all who shall wish me ill,
Afar and a-near,
Alone and in a multitude
Against every cruel, merciless power
That may oppose my body and soul.
Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ in me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,

Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise, Christ to shield me,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
I arise today.

The 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.

We rest again in the power of Christ as we sing, *Holy overshadowing...*

Song Holy Overshadowing

Verse 1

O spread your wings of mercy over me
And guard my heart with true humility.
No shadow of the darkness pressing in,
Only the holy overshadowing.

*Underneath your wings,
Overshadowing.*

Verse 2

No refuge will I seek but God alone,
No hiding place, save only at your throne,
Only the cross, the blood to wash my sin,
Only the holy overshadowing.

*Underneath Your wings,
Overshadowing.*

Chorus

*You are my shield and my glory.
You are the lifter of my head,
And though the storms may rage around me,
I'll be safe within,
Beneath the holy overshadowing.*

*Underneath Your wings,
Overshadowing.*

Verse 3

No burden on my back too hard to bear,
Only the easy load you bid me wear.
Until these troubles pass my heart will sing
Praise for the holy overshadowing.

*Underneath Your wings,
Overshadowing.*

Chorus x 2

*You are my shield and my glory.
You are the lifter of my head,
And though the storms may rage around me,
I'll be safe within,
Beneath the holy overshadowing.*

Final Refrain

Underneath your wings,

Over-shadowing, overshadowing, overshadowing.

Underneath your wings,

Overshadowing, overshadowing, overshadowing.

Offering

For all the rich gifts of life we give you our thanks and ask that you receive our humble gifts to church and charity. Please use them as a sign of your everlasting mercy and grace. Amen.

Our prayers of intercession today are led by Cynthia.

Prayers of Intercession

Heavenly Father, we come as friends joined as one, to be in your presence together. Some will have had a good past week; others may have had a more difficult one. We open our hands now to let all the difficult issues we have rise up to you, refresh and renew each one of us, sure in the knowledge that whatever our situation, you are there with us. Father, your creation is wonderful, but sadly we have not been good stewards and much has been done to damage what was once perfect. As some countries recognise what needs to be done to reverse damage, we pray that soon the some will become all. We pray for drought-torn countries, where growing enough food is almost impossible, much due to climate change and the damage human decisions have caused. We pray for the women in Afghanistan whose lives have been squeezed to mean little or nothing by a cruel Taliban regime. We pray for children who are used and abused wherever they live, and we pray for peace from the ongoing war in the Ukraine. Our thoughts and hopes are for those in government and in local councils, that the decisions they make will be good and true. We pray for those young people taking important exams, for they will be our future leaders and decision makers.

In a short silence we bring to you now those known and unknown to us who are in need of love, comfort and healing.

We place in your gentle hands those who are sick. Ease their pain and heal the damage done to them in body, mind and spirit. Be present to them through the support of friends and in the care of doctors and nurses, and fill them with the warmth of your love now and always.

Amen

Many thanks Cynthia for those prayers. Let's attend to our Bible readings now from Acts and from Ephesians.

Bible Readings

Acts 1: 1-11

Jesus taken up into heaven

¹ In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. ³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'

⁶ Then they gathered round him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'

⁷ He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'

Ephesians 1: 15 – 23

Thanksgiving and prayer

¹⁵ For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, ¹⁶ I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Those disciples were sent out as witnesses to the ends of the earth. We contemplate that global mission again as we sing, *From the sun's rising...*

Song (WT 104) **From the Sun's Rising**

Verse 1

From the sun's rising unto the sun's setting,
Jesus, our Lord, shall be great in the earth,
And all earth's kingdoms shall be His dominion;
All of creation shall sing of His worth.

Chorus

*Let every heart, every voice,
Every tongue join with spirits ablaze;
One in His love, we will circle the world
With the song of His praise.
O let all His people rejoice,
And let all the earth hear His voice!*

Verse 2

To every tongue, tribe and nation He sends us
To make disciples, to teach and baptise,
For all authority to Him is given.
Now as His witnesses we shall arise.

Chorus

Verse 3

Come, let us join with the church from all nations,
Cross every border, throw wide every door,
Workers with Him, as He gathers His harvest,
Till earth's far corners our Saviour adore!

Chorus

Ending

*O let all His people rejoice,
And let all the earth hear His voice!*

Sermon

Authentic Witness in the 21st Century

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Since the age of 17 I've lived consciously as a Christian. My faith helps me to live confidently, for I have the knowledge that I am a child of God. I don't wish to be arrogant when I say it; it's a simple fact but here it is: God loves me! I also know I don't have to be perfect, because God forgives my sins, but loves me too much to leave me in them; so God inspires me to live a life that is wholesome for me and wholesome for those I care about.

I experience the joy of worship week by week to connect me with what's really important in life. This weekly celebration gives me the energy to live life well.

I'm not especially smart, and I can't work out everything that's going on in life, but faith gives me peace - peace regardless of my understanding. I even have a sense of a **relationship** with God. Most mornings I read the scriptures and I find I am guided, and I gain insight about myself and about my life through that reading. I also sometimes feel his love welling up in my heart, like a fountain bursting into life... or warning me about some path I'm considering. I talk with him day by day, and so often have a sense of answered prayer.

My life has had its challenges. Four and a half years ago, my wife Ruth died of pancreatic cancer. My faith didn't shield me from that blow, and I took a long time to work through it. Life is tough as most of you will know, but faith gave me the ability to be honest about how I felt - because nothing - not even death itself - can prise me away from the hand of the God who loves me.

As a person of Christian faith, I am part of a global movement that's twenty centuries old and has members in heaven and members on earth. In other words, I belong. I belong to the family of God that breaks the bonds of time and space, tribe and class. This great family across the world is mobilised to work for justice and peace, for harmony within and between the nations; and we always long to share the reality of the love of God so that people can know Jesus as we do! He is the key to life, the joy of the human heart, the glue between families, the camaraderie that can arise between strangers, the one who challenges us to love even our enemies... He is the exact image of God; the morning star who shines in my heart as I rise each day; the song of peace that settles my heart at night; the asker of difficult questions; the teller of beguiling stories; the giver of great promises...

Jesus is knocking on the door of every human heart. Letting him in is like switching on a light in a darkened room; it's like opening flood gates onto an arid land; it's like watching TV in colour for the first time; it's like getting a really good wifi connection.

Even the demise of our own bodies holds no fear for the Christian. I already know God and, however I may experience the passage from mortality into eternity, I am confident I will be passing away from this world of pain and tears and into the realm of the everlasting love of God. I know this because I have already sampled that heavenly reality, in worship, prayer and meditation, and I have the promises of scripture to lean on.

How can I not want to share this beautiful faith? Well, Christianity can have a cart-load of negative associations. In the 21st century, we may have to sift out the shining nougat of true golden faith from centuries of abuse and failure and dross. Let's consider some of these negative associations. They're odours of inauthenticity that linger around our bold proclamations of faith.

* * *

First whiff of inauthenticity: Christianity has been a violent, exclusive and repressive religion. And for sure, ever since Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire three centuries after Jesus, its status as a religion has been compromised.

Now I'm not sure Jesus ever wanted to create a religion. Rather he was scattering the seeds for a movement of peace, joy and love, first for the individual and second for society. But when his movement got hijacked by an empire, it lost its way. After beginning as a movement of love, peace and justice with a special care for the poor and the marginalised, it was appropriated as a religious tool of oppression. It has been used to justify unspeakable crimes such as racism, slavery, forced conversion, colonialism and even mass killings. This is not **my** Jesus - this is a cultural appropriation of his movement, selectively misapplying Jesus' teaching to shore up the power of the powerful.

So, yes, Jesus' name has been abused to justify violence. But Jesus himself is the Prince of Peace, and he taught us to make peace by loving even our enemies. In

spite of the appropriation of Christianity by the powerful, throughout history very, very many ordinary and sincere Christians have worked with others to bring peace and justice into our world.

Can my very personal testimony with which I began this talk be heard as authentic, given such violence associated with my faith? In my judgement, Christians need a deep humility as we witness. We need to express a deep regret at the failures of our religious forebears.

Now, Baptist Christians are rooted in a tradition of dissent - we refuse to conform just because officials or society tell us we should, and we believe that every person should be free to choose their own religion or philosophy. But even with such a noble historical root, Baptist Christians have also been associated with racism and even violence. I recall with pain the racism I heard about in the not-too-distant history of the Baptist church I attended in Leeds. Black people were turned away from many Baptist churches.

So, yes, I hold my head up high and share the wonder of the Saviour who is the Prince of Peace. But I also dip my head in shame for the failings of churches like ours not so very long ago. An authentic Christian witness in the 21st century must be honest about our past and open to historical truth.

And it must also be comfortable with diversity. Not everyone is Baptist. Not everyone is Christian. Not everyone is white. Not everyone is straight. I might add, not everyone is male. In fact, not everyone is born either male or female. Some are born intersex with bodies that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female.

Now we hold the well-known touchstone of John 14: *Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one can come to the Father except through him*. At the same time, we insist on the right of every person to be true to who they themselves are - whether they be transgender or gay, male, female or intersex, Sikh or Buddhist, theistic or humanist or whatever else...

And as people find God in another religious tradition, well, that is no threat to us. How can I say that, if at the same time I believe Jesus is **the** way to the Father? The

way of Jesus is the way of mercy and grace. If my Hindu friend is filled with the love of God by trusting in the mercy and grace of God – well, isn't that rather wonderful?

I myself know that way of grace by explicitly naming Jesus. But 'Jesus' is not a magic word that gets you into heaven. He is the living, dying, rising, reigning proof that God is good and forgiving, that God meets us in our human condition, that God fills us with his love, not because we are perfect, but because he is loving.

That human condition includes people who don't fit into age-old categories. Yes, God made them male and female, but some don't quite fit in that way. In Jesus, God enters their reality too.

Now, Jesus was a man, but he was a man who ducked out of gender stereotypes, never married and understood the perspectives and experiences of women. He knew how they were held in thrall by patriarchy, and in his kingdom women were valued, liberated, disciplined, and needed.

In some cultures, there has been a third gender, people born who seem to embody both male and female characteristics. As we've seen, this can happen physically with the human body, but can be manifested in a person's character, in their more complete emotional and spiritual life. Anyway, in some such cultures, these people are regarded as being holy, or wise. I would hesitate to put Jesus into such a category, or any category for that matter, but his approach to life reflected both male and female characteristics. At the very least, I would suggest that Jesus would be quite comfortable with what we today call gender fluidity, and, if someone were unsure about their gender identity, he would see a beloved and valued person rather than an anomaly or difficulty or problem or label.

My personal witness to the love of God I know explicitly through Jesus, becomes all the more credible if I approach witness with both regret for the historical abuses of churches, and openness to others' religious experiences, as I have described. My personal witness is more authentic if it is also open to people who don't fit into all the usual categories. It's more credible because it's authentic, both to my inner experience, and also to the changing cultural world in which we live.

* * *

Second: whiff of inauthenticity: Christians are anti-science.

When Luke wrote the reading we had from the Acts of the Apostles, his view of the nature of the universe would have been, of course, largely prescientific. But by that time, some Greeks believed in a spherical earth and Aristarchus had already suggested the idea that the earth rotated around the sun, rather than vice versa. For all that, the text describes the disciples looking up at the sky as if they felt **that** was the abode of God to which Jesus had just travelled.

Aren't Christians a bit like flat-earthers, evolution-deniers and believers in a literal seven-day creation? Well, some Christians do retain what Marcus Borg called post-critical naivety - people who ignore the post-biblical truth of science and history. Believers in the New Testament era could be forgiven if they pictured heaven according to their own cosmology. Some biblical books may picture the earth as flat with four corners.

But now, God also speaks through science. We know the cosmos as this inexpressibly vast three-dimensional space into which galaxies and stars are flying at ever-increasing speeds. Far from the Earth being a fixed centre, with the realm of God arranged on a great crystal hemisphere above our heads, our earth is just one of uncountably many planets whirling around their stars, as these stars process around their galaxies, and as the galaxies fly away from the place of origin, the big bang. The bigger and more wonderful the universe, the bigger and more wonderful is our God.

Christians believe that God came to earth as a human to show us that he was with us, that he loved us, and that he would take us to him as we trusted our lives to his love. Are there intelligent forms of life on other planets capable of making spiritual and moral choices, free to love or not to love? If there are, might God have made similar interventions on countless other planets?

So, yes, if we wed our faith to a pre-scientific world view, for many this smells of inauthenticity, because we are being asked to deny things that scientists tell us are absolutely true or very probable. It's both far more exciting and far more authentic if we celebrate the discoveries of science as further discoveries about God.

But again, we have to be honest. In a recent study, biologists were far less likely to have faith than physicists. Why? Whereas physics opens us up to the vast wonders of the universe and makes God seem far more mind-boggling, evolutionary biology forces us to face up to the cruelty inherent in nature. We might still sing *All things bright and beautiful* from time to time, but each little flower that opens might have its leaves eaten by slugs. Each little bird that sings might become dinner for a buzzard. And in some extreme examples, God's creatures experience extended pain and slow deaths in ways that would become the stuff of a grim horror film if projected into the human world.

To be truly authentic, we must veer away from twee and simplistic ideas about God's beautiful world. It **is** beautiful, for sure, but it's also red in tooth and claw. What does this tell us about the world God has made? To be authentic in our witness is to hear this challenge, and also to acknowledge the bits we as Christians haven't quite got our heads around yet. But an authentic Christian witness is always pro-truth. So, an authentic Christian witness is always pro-science.

* * *

Third whiff of inauthenticity: Christians don't care about the planet because they are focused on heaven. One of my musical heroes as a young Christian was the late great Larry Norman. He once sang this couplet:

*What a mess the world is in; I wonder who began it.
Don't ask me, I'm only visiting this planet.*

And, in a way, he was right. Human life flies by faster than a weaver's shuttle, and Christians still draw comfort from the vision of a heavenly home.

According to Mark's gospel, Jesus was with the wild animals and attended by angels after he was tested in the wilderness. According to Paul, the very fabric of the cosmos is straining for the coming of the kingdom of God, as a mother strains to give birth. According to Genesis, the fruitfulness and variety of all life on earth is a harmonious expression of the goodness of God. God is good and so is all he has made.

For all that, the development of realistic, affordable and effective responses to climate change is not a theme of the New Testament, but such activities are entirely consistent with the Jesus movement, which was to bring harmony and peace both to humanity and the entire natural world.

At Hearsall Baptist Church we hope to receive our silver award as an eco-church. Our commitment to playing our part in addressing the huge threats of climate change is an essential component of any authentic witness. So many young people today would not dream of signing up to any movement or religion or club that didn't take the challenge of climate change seriously.

* * *

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised... John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit...

Those first disciples had to wait for the great Pentecost event before beginning their work of witness in concentric circles from Jerusalem. Perhaps we, too, must wait a bit, until we have a better sense of the nature of our witness in the changing world of the 21st century. As we wait, we pray, we work out what we think the gospel looks like today, and we wait for that deeper, authentic power to witness. That power comes as the Holy Spirit draws us into an ever-deeper experience of God's love: and an ever broader experience of that love: love for all people in their various forms, tribes, groups and religions; love for the unending mystery and wonder of spacetime which beggars our imagination; love for the beautiful blue planet earth whose teeming life is seriously threatened by climate change.

Now scientists say that all that happens in the universe is controlled by four fundamental forces: gravity, the weak force, electromagnetism, and the strong force.

And those who follow church calendars will know that Ascension Day is coming on Thursday. On that day we celebrate that Jesus' way of love, sacrifice, truth, peace and resurrection has been authenticated as the fifth fundamental force of the universe. Far from some minor claim of deluded fools, the ascension is the assertion that this fifth fundamental force of love is the ultimate authority over all forces through all ages, across all reality.

Everything and everyone is being brought together in love. The God who is love, in the words of Ephesians 1, fills the church and fills everything in every way. That same power which raised Christ and seated him at the Father's right hand in heaven - that power of invincible love is the power that works in us and transforms the universe. Everything comes to him.

So, no truth about science or human nature or history can ever be inconvenient to authentic Christian witness. Authentic witness is always stronger whenever it incorporates the truth, however that truth may have come to light. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, least of all the truth!

Jesus is the truth. If we follow truth, in a way we also follow him. Let's sing, *Will you come and follow me...*

Hymn (BPW 363) **Will You Come and Follow Me**

Will you come and follow me,
If I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
And never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
Will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown in you
And you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind
If I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind
And never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare,
Should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you,
And you in me?

Will you let the blinded see,
If I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free
And never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean,
And do such as this unseen,
And admit to what I mean in you,
And you in me?

Will you love the "you" you hide,
If I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside
And never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
To reshape the world around,
Through my sight and touch and sound in you,
And you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true
When you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you
And never be the same.
In Your company I'll go
Where your love and footsteps show,
Thus, I'll move and live and grow in you,
And you in me.

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.