

Order of Service 31<sup>st</sup> July 2022

***The Gathering God***

Welcome

Hello and welcome to Hearsall at Home for 31st July 2022. Last week we considered the topic of prayer and today we consider this theme more deeply in the light of those reflections and of the scripture readings set for today, as we consider the God who gathers the lost from the four points of the compass, and whose love endures forever.

Call to Worship

- 1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
his love endures forever.
- 2 Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story –  
those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
- 3 those he gathered from the lands,  
from east and west, from north and south.
- 4 Some wandered in desert wastelands,  
finding no way to a city where they could settle.
- 5 They were hungry and thirsty,  
and their lives ebbed away.
- 6 Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress.
- 7 He led them by a straight way  
to a city where they could settle.
- 8 Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love  
and his wonderful deeds for mankind,
- 9 for he satisfies the thirsty  
and fills the hungry with good things
  
- 43 Let the one who is wise heed these things  
and ponder the loving deeds of the Lord.

(Psalm 107: 1 - 9 & 43)

**Song (WT 64) **Come, Now is the Time to Worship****

*Come, now is the time to worship.*

*Come, now is the time to give your heart.*

*Come, just as you are to worship.*

*Come, just as you are before your God,*

*Come.*

One day every tongue will confess You are God,

One day every knee will bow.

Still the greatest treasure remains for those

Who gladly choose you now.

*Come, now is the time to worship.*

*Come, now is the time to give your heart.*

*Come, just as you are to worship.*

*Come, just as you are before your God,*

*Come.*

*...Come, come, come.*

**Prayer of Praise (Terry Hinks)**

Mighty God,

we rejoice in your reckless and extravagant love

scattered among us

and found in the mud and thorns of life.

We rejoice

that your will for us and for the world

is not one of carefully apportioned judgement

or neatly wrapped rewards.

Praise be!

Your aim and desire for all your creation

is a cup full and overflowing with good wine,

a banquet for all to share,

a harvest of full and ripe grains,  
a growing tree in which all can make their nest.

Your gifts, freely offered,  
are life in all its fullness,  
hope in abundance,  
peace that passes understanding,  
love that none can measure  
from which nothing can separate us.

The Lord's Prayer (Version from Anglica Church of New Zealand)

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,  
Source of all that is and that shall be,  
Father and Mother of us all,  
Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!  
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!  
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!  
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.  
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.  
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.  
From trials too great to endure, spare us.  
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and for ever.  
Amen.

Offering

Make us channels of your peace Lord. In that spirit we rejoice in sharing our gifts  
with churches and charities near and far. Take our humble offerings and use them to  
share your love in the world at large. Amen.

Hymn (BPW 23) **You Holy Angels Bright**

1. You holy angels bright,  
who wait at God's right hand,  
or through the realms of light  
fly at your Lord's command:  
assist our song,  
for else the theme  
too high will seem for mortal tongue.
  
2. You faithful souls at rest,  
who ran this earthly race,  
and now, from sin released,  
behold your Saviour's face,  
God's praises sound,  
as in his light  
with sweet delight you do abound.
  
3. You saints, who toil below,  
adore your heavenly King,  
and onward as you go  
some joyful anthems sing;  
take what he gives  
and praise him still,  
through good and ill, who ever lives!
  
4. My soul, bear now your part,  
triumph in God above,  
and with a well-tuned heart  
sing out the songs of love!  
Let all your days  
till life shall end,  
whate'er he send, be filled with praise!

Our prayers of intercession for this week are led by Cynthia Baker.

## Prayers of Intercession

Heavenly Father,

You created the world and all that is in it. You created humankind to live one with another, to care for your creation and for each other. You gave us minds to think and make decisions for ourselves. Sadly, we fail in so many ways. Greed and power so often rule the decisions that have been made. Earth's resources are plundered and not always used for good. Poverty and conflict still fill the news headlines and the question is often asked 'where is God in all of this?'

Father, we know that you are always with and in us, but we need to listen, to hear and know what would be pleasing to you.

We pray for those countries who have suffered long periods of drought where food crops have failed. Countries where huge fires have raged, destroying everything. We know that this is the result of the imbalance to nature that humankind has caused.

Thank you for the many aid agencies who work across the world, educating and demonstrating better ways to grow food, find fresh water and build healthier communities.

Father, there seems to be so much anger in the hearts of some. We hear of abuse to fire, ambulance and hospital staff, all who are just doing their job of helping us. So, we pray for calm and peace for the angry souls and love and encouragement for the human angels who help us all.

We pray for our own country, where many are struggling as the cost of living keeps rising. Food Banks beginning to struggle as donations fall. We pray for our government as they seek a new leader. We ask that you be with whoever is elected, that they will work with complete honesty and openness as they try to rebuild public confidence.

We bring to you now those known and unknown to us who are in need of your healing grace:

We continue to pray for peace in the Ukraine.

Father, may all who are struggling, those we have named and the many unknown to us, find peace and strength as you enfold them in your loving arms.

Thank you, Lord of our lives. Amen

Many thanks, Cynthia, for those prayers.

### Readings

We hear now our Bible readings from Hosea and from Colossians.

#### **Hosea 11: 1 - 11**

##### *God's love for Israel*

**11** 'When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.

<sup>2</sup> But the more they were called,  
the more they went away from me.<sup>[a]</sup>

They sacrificed to the Baals  
and they burned incense to images.

<sup>3</sup> It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
taking them by the arms;  
but they did not realise  
it was I who healed them.

<sup>4</sup> I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with ties of love.

To them I was like one who lifts  
a little child to the cheek,  
and I bent down to feed them.

<sup>5</sup> 'Will they not return to Egypt  
and will not Assyria rule over them  
because they refuse to repent?

<sup>6</sup> A sword will flash in their cities;  
it will devour their false prophets

and put an end to their plans.

<sup>7</sup> My people are determined to turn from me.

Even though they call me God Most High,

I will by no means exalt them.

<sup>8</sup> 'How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, Israel?

How can I treat you like Admah?

How can I make you like Zeboyim?

My heart is changed within me;

all my compassion is aroused.

<sup>9</sup> I will not carry out my fierce anger,

nor will I devastate Ephraim again.

For I am God, and not a man –

the Holy One among you.

I will not come against their cities.

<sup>10</sup> They will follow the LORD;

he will roar like a lion.

When he roars,

his children will come trembling from the west.

<sup>11</sup> They will come from Egypt,

trembling like sparrows,

from Assyria, fluttering like doves.

I will settle them in their homes,'

declares the LORD.

### **Colossians 3: 1 - 11**

*Living as those made alive in Christ*

**3** Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

<sup>5</sup> Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. <sup>6</sup> Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. <sup>7</sup> You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. <sup>8</sup> But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. <sup>9</sup> Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices <sup>10</sup> and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. <sup>11</sup> Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

God transforms the world with loving service. We celebrate that in the words of our next hymn.

Hymn (BPW 473) **Brother, Sister, Let Me Serve You**

Brother, sister, let me serve you,  
Let me be as Christ to you;  
Pray that I might have the grace to  
Let you be my servant, too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,  
We are companions on the road;  
We are here to help each other  
Walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you  
In the night-time of your fear;  
I will hold my hand out to you,  
Speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping,  
When you laugh, I'll laugh with you;  
I will share your joy and sorrow  
Till we've seen this journey through.



When we sing to God in heaven,  
We shall find such harmony,  
Born of all we've known together  
Of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,  
Let me be as Christ to you;  
Pray that I may have the grace to  
Let you be my servant, too.

### Sermon

#### ***The Gathering God***

Imagine you're listening to a Christian lady, and she tells you how God has wonderfully intervened in the case of her husband. You listen attentively. She says her husband was on a plane that crashed. There were 104 people on the plane and only one survived: Her beloved husband. Isn't God good?

Well no, we might reasonably respond. Your God is not good. He is very bad indeed! Why would he allow 103 people to die in a fireball? The woman's view, that God reached into reality and manipulated events to rescue her particular man, creates far more problems than it solves. Her version of God clearly had the power to save everyone on the plane but chose to let nearly all of them die a horrible death.

People often defend their view of God from the charge that he permits suffering by saying that humans must have free will, and are therefore at liberty to do harm as well as good. But this is far from a complete defence. What of the innocent child who has no choice as he is grossly abused by his parents? Yes, the parents have a choice to do good or evil, but an innocent toddler has no choice at all.

And right now, as I talk about God, many sick children around the world will be reaching the end of their short lives, dying from cancer or other illnesses. Other children will be suffering in severe poverty or in war zones. And all this is not new: it is in the nature of human existence from time immemorial.

So, I am surprised when people are surprised by suffering or evil. It's hardly a novel development in human history, after all. Where does our surprise at human suffering stem from?

Of course, it stems from our view of God. Who is this God, whom we worship every Sunday? Why do we bother to pray for the concerns of the world each week?

Is God essentially a puppet master, who pulls the strings of everyone on the planet, manipulating events to avoid suffering? Is God like a global chief executive officer, micro-managing affairs on planet earth?

Well, the woman whose husband survived the plane crash sees God in this way. She thinks that God can step into human reality and pull strings to fix events for her personal convenience. But, as we have seen, such a view of God begs far more questions than it answers.

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But how else can we see God? This talk draws on a branch of theology called Process Theology. This school of thought takes the bull by the horns and baldly says that God **cannot** act directly in the created world. Process Theology claims this is more or less self-evident. If God **could** act, and if God were good, then God would act. But he doesn't! So God seems to have set up the world differently from that.

So how does God affect the world in any way? After all, the Bible is very clear that God **does** act in our world.

To answer that we need to think about power. Some people exercise **unilateral power** - which has been defined as the ability to change others without oneself being changed. Unilateral power flows in one direction only. A person exercising absolute unilateral power may be compared with a statue - which might evoke a response of fear or respect in a group of people but is itself quite unaffected. One may think of a tyrannical ruler exercising unilateral power. Those who have exercised such unilateral power include people such as Idi Amin, Adolf Hitler or Vladimir Putin.

Unilateral power is top-down. It's command and control. It demands that people fall in line with the will of the powerful, or risk losing their freedom, or even their lives. It

could be pictured as a hierarchy, with a controller at the top, making edicts which lieutenants below him obey, with directives flowing from the top down to the ordinary people at the bottom, who would do well to get in line.

If you imagine God in such a scheme, he would be sitting at the top, issuing his orders. God the dictator.

But then there is **relational power**. Relational power is the ability both to affect and to be affected. It works in three stages:

- 1 The power to be open and sensitive to the events of the world around us
- 2 The power to be create a sensitive and rational response to those events
- 3 The power to influence others by having first been influenced by them

If unilateral power might be seen as a top-down tree-diagram, relational power is much more like a complex network or web of interconnections. Power is exercised as each connection reflects healthier and better ways of existing. If you picture God in such a scheme, God would be distributed throughout all the connections we would be imagining, suffering with ordinary people as they attempt to find healing, grace and justice.

We may well know a scripture verse or two that suggests God never changes, and **in his character**, of course, that is true. But there are many other scriptures which suggest God feels sadness, pity, jealousy, compassion, anger and love. Process theology suggests that God is moved by the world, always responds through relational power. God's influence on the world is one of loving persuasion, not one of forced obedience.

As Christians, we worship a God revealed supremely in Jesus on the cross. The power of suffering love is the defining reality of faith for us. We are not worshipping a God who lobs thunderbolts from heaven at the bad people. In the words we heard from Hosea: *My heart is **changed** within me; all my compassion is aroused.* God is profoundly affected by the world and continues to respond by reaching out in his unflinching love. But according to process theology, he does not snap his divine fingers and solve the problem instantly.

As Teresa of Avila famously put it,

*Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours. God has no hands on earth but ours.*

\* \* \*

Last week we enjoyed a fruitful discussion on the topic of prayer. I hope you can see how today's reflection is relevant. The teaching of Jesus in Luke 11 is all about prayer as relationship. In response to prayer, God gives, not a thunderbolt on Vladimir Putin's limousine, but the Holy Spirit of love to all people humble enough to seek him.

When I assert, from Jesus' teaching, that God **always** answers prayer, I am saying that God always uses relational power. If you are puzzled that God 'allows' so much suffering in the world, is that because you are picturing God as using unilateral power, rather than relational power?

- Is your God a puppet master or a lover?
- Is your God a dictator or a caring parent?
- Is your God a Chief Executive Officer or a friend who sticks closer than a brother?

Our reading from Hosea 11 shows that such wrestling goes back to the 8th century before Christ. This text is a beautiful attempt to express how God is feeling about the waywardness of his chosen people. They have not been **manipulated** by God; they have been **called** by him. God is not pulling their strings like a puppet-master but wooing them by revealing his heart.

They have been left free to wander, and they sacrificed to Baals and made alliances with other nations and went their own way. Hosea's God wrestles with his anger - they will return back to the land of slavery, Egypt, the very place from which he called them!

But this God will not carry out his fierce anger! He has led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love! To them he was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and he bent down to feed them. His heart is **changed** by compassion. He will not carry out his fierce anger. He will roar like a lion, and his children will come trembling from the west, to be settled in their homes.

This is not pure process theology, because Hosea's God **could** act with destructive power, but chooses not to. But the effect still resembles process theology - the God being portrayed refrains from the bullying and violence so often associated with unilateral power and acts only in steadfast love, calling, roaring and wooing to gather his people back home.

Eight centuries later, Paul, or someone writing in his school, expressed his own sense of what we might call God's *soft* power. This relational power may be soft, but it is also revolutionary. The letter has already portrayed the crucified Jesus as the power by which God defeats all spiritual foes and gathers everything under one head. In the section we heard, Christians are encouraged to root their very lived experience here on earth **in** the heavenly Christ. They are told that their lives have been hidden away with Christ in God.

Through prayer, reflection and worship, these Christians are encouraged to follow Christ's example, and let something called "the new self" come out. In that new self, all the old barriers of human existence fall away. They are so completely rooted in the heavenly reality, that there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, because Christ is all, and is in all.

\* \* \*

And in the prayer room, we can get a sense of that heavenly reality today. In the prayer room there is no Russian or Ukrainian, gay or straight, Baptist, Orthodox or Catholic, for Christ is all, and is in all. In the prayer room we experience the relational power of God.

On any given day, relational power may seem very weak; but in the end, it triumphs. It is like the power of an oak growing inevitably from an acorn into a mighty tree. It is like the power of a campfire, gathering everyone around to be warmed. Over a long

period of time, relational power is comprehensively effective. The brutality of unilateral power seems crude and ephemeral by comparison.

Soft relational power is often associated with suffering. God enters our experience of suffering and helps us to have the courage to yearn for a better world. God is in the experience of the bad, desiring the good, which is not being experienced. That is a definition of suffering.

We have sung today, Lord, reign in me! But he rules by winning our hearts today. We have sung, brother, sister, let me serve you. This is how God works in the world. We will sing in a little while of our God revealed as the servant king. Christians believe that the basin and the towel and the cross are the means by which true Kingship develops. Our God gently and patiently gathers the lost together, from the north and the south and the east and the west, into the great feast of heaven.

According to this way of seeing the world, God does indeed **always** answer prayer, and it might unfold in something like the following steps in which I will lead us now.

- Settle quietly and consciously into the presence of the God who is love.
- Still your body by taking a brief tour and tensing and relaxing your muscles.
- Still your mind by drawing it back to a repeated phrase, such as *God is love* or *Come, Lord Jesus*.
- Let all your personal earthly qualifications fall away. Your race, gender, sexuality, nationality, career, education may all be very fine, but in the prayer room none of that matters; it falls away like layers of unneeded clothing.
- Experience your new self, who is being renewed in the image of its creator. This is your best self. This is your eternal self. This is you, the beloved.
- Be entirely filled with the Holy Spirit; something Jesus promised would happen when we come to our heavenly Father.
- Now call to mind someone who is suffering. Find that Christ is suffering with them. Together, yearn for what is good, and your yearning is your suffering with them.

- Trust that the suffering one for whom you have been praying is being directly touched by the loving presence of God, giving them hope and energy to reach for healing or peace.
- Dedicate yourself to serving the God of love in the world at large.

In Jesus God put into effect his supreme plan for saving the universe: vulnerable presence, sacrificial love and humble service. We sing, *From heaven you came helpless babe...*

Song (WT 100) **From Heaven You Came**

Verse 1

From *heaven* You came, helpless babe,  
Entered our world, Your glory veiled.  
Not to be served but to serve  
And give Your life that we might live.

*Chorus*

*This is our God, the Servant King.  
He calls us now to follow Him;  
To bring our lives as a daily offering  
Of worship to the Servant King.*

Verse 2

There in the garden of tears,  
My heavy load He chose to bear;  
His heart with sorrow was torn,  
Yet not my will but Yours, He said.

*Chorus*

Verse 3

Come see His hands and His feet;  
The scars that speak of sacrifice.  
Hands that flung stars into space,  
To cruel nails surrendered.

*Chorus*

*This is our God, the Servant King.  
He calls us now to follow Him;  
To bring our lives as a daily offering  
Of worship to the Servant King.*

Verse 4

So let us learn how to serve,  
And in our lives enthrone Him.  
Each other's needs to prefer,  
For it is Christ we're serving.

*Chorus*

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.