

Order of Service 16th October 2022

Holy Communion

Praying the Pain

Welcome

Hello, and welcome to Hearsall at Home for 16th October 2022. Today our theme is *praying the pain*, as we reflect on the power that comes through an honest prayer offered, with total surrender, to God.

Call to Worship

From prison, Paul wrote these words to Philemon:

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.

Philemon 1: 4 - 6

And we pray today...

thanking God for the love we share,
for our fellowship and partnership in faith,
and asking for a deeper understanding of his goodness.

We bring ourselves to him in a couple of beautiful worship songs... *Lord, I Come to You* (WT 270) *and* (WT 7) *All Heaven Declares..*

Song (WT 270) **Lord, I Come to You**

Lord, I come to you,
let my heart be changed, renewed,
flowing from the grace that I've found in you.
And Lord, I've come to know
the weakness I see in me
will be stripped away by the power of your love.

Chorus

*Hold me close, let your love surround me.
Bring me near, draw me to your side.
And as I wait, I'll rise up like the eagle,
And I will soar with you, your spirit leads me on
In the power of your love.*

Lord, unveil my eyes, let me see you face to face,
the knowledge of your love as you live in me.
Lord, renew my mind as your will unfolds in my life,
in living every day by the power of your love.

Chorus

Song (WT 7) **All Heaven Declares**

Verse 1

All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord.
Who can compare with the beauty of the Lord?

Chorus

*Forever He will be the Lamb upon the throne;
I gladly bow the knee and worship Him, alone.*

Verse 2

I will proclaim the glory of the risen Lord,
Who once was slain to reconcile man to God.

Chorus x 2

*Forever He will be the Lamb upon the throne;
I gladly bow the knee and worship Him, alone.*

Prayer of Adoration

Lord, life can be tough. We see through a glass darkly and may be puzzled by what we glimpse.

How we treasure your promises, but sometimes life takes unwelcome turns, and it can be hard to carry on believing in your word. There are moments when we wonder

if we may have misunderstood you altogether. There are times when we must shed some previously-cherished aspect of our life or spiritual practice. It can be like shedding a skin that has become too small, in order to grow into a bigger experience of you. Give us the courage to walk on in faith, even when faith calls us beyond the familiar.

But in all life's confusion and uncertainty we know that you are the one constant presence. People, dreams, theologies, aspirations, ideas and plans may come and go, but you are the same Lord, and we wait in reverence before you now.

Open the inner door of our hearts that we may thank you, adore you, bless you and even love you. Amen.

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

We acknowledge God's goodness as we dedicate our offering.

Offering

All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. We bless the Lord for his love for us all, and we offer our gifts as small tokens of our heart's devotion.

Amen.

We sing the song, *All I once held dear...*

Song (WT 8) **All I Once Held Dear**

All I once held dear built my life upon,
All this world reveres and wars to own;
All I once thought gain, I have counted loss;
Spent and worthless now, compared to this.

Chorus

*Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you,
There is no greater thing:
You're my all, you're the best,
You're my joy, my righteousness;
And I love you, Lord.*

*Now my heart's desire is to know you more,
To be found in you and known as yours;
To possess by faith what I could not earn –
All-surpassing gift of righteousness.*

Chorus

Oh, to know the power of your risen life,
And to know you in your sufferings;
To become like you in your death, my Lord,
So with you to live and never die.

Chorus

Our prayers of intercession this week are led by Denise Rée.

Prayers of Intercession

For today's prayers of intercession I'm going to read a poem by Edith Nesbit.

Jesus in London by Edith Nesbit

If Jesus came to London, came to London today,
He would not go to the West End, he would come down our way;
He'd talk with the children dancing, to the organ out in the street
And say he was their big Brother, and give them something to eat.

He wouldn't go to the mansions where the charitable live;
He'd come to the tenement houses where we ain't got nothing to give.
He'd come so kind and so homely, and treat us to beer and bread,
And tell us how we ought to behave; and we'd try to mind what He said.

Then He would say, 'I told you the time I was here before,
That you were, all of you, brothers, all you that I suffered for.
I won't go into your churches, I'll stop in the sun outside.
You bring out the men, your brothers, the men for whom I died!'

Then some of the rich would be sorry, and all would be very scared,
And they'd say, 'But we never knew, Lord!' And He'd say, 'You never cared!'
And some would be sick and shameful because they'd know that they knew,
And the best would say, 'We were wrong, Lord, now tell us what to do!'

I think He'd be sitting, likely, for someone 'ud bring Him a chair,
With a common kid cuddled up on His knee and the common sun on His hair;
And they'd be standing before Him, and He'd say, 'You know that you knew.
Why haven't you worked for your brothers the same as I worked for you?'

'For since you're all of you brothers it's clear as God's blessed sun
That each must work for the others, not thousands work for one.
And the ones that have lived bone-idle, if they want Me to hear them pray,
Let them go and work for their livings the only honest way!

I wish He would come and say it; perhaps they'd believe it then,
And work like men for their livings and let us work like men.
Brothers? They don't believe it, the lie on their lips is red.
They'll never believe till He comes again, or till we rise from the dead!

Lord, as we hear the words of this poem, written so many years ago, we think of our own city and how we could apply what we hear. And help us to look after those around us who need care and your blessing: those who are sick; those who are frightened; those who are worrying where their heating is going to come from.

Lord, in your mercy hear our prayers.

Amen

Many thanks Denise for those prayers. Our Bible readings today are from 1 Samuel and from John's gospel.

Bible Readings

1 Samuel 1: 1 - 20

The birth of Samuel

1 There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. **2** He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

3 Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. **4** Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. **5** But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. **6** Because the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. **7** This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. **8** Her husband Elkanah would say to her, 'Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?'

9 Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the LORD's house. **10** In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. **11** And she made a vow, saying, 'LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember

me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.'

¹² As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³ Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk ¹⁴ and said to her, 'How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine.'

¹⁵ 'Not so, my lord,' Hannah replied, 'I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. ¹⁶ Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.'

¹⁷ Eli answered, 'Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.'

¹⁸ She said, 'May your servant find favour in your eyes.' Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

¹⁹ Early the next morning they arose and worshipped before the LORD and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰ So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, 'Because I asked the LORD for him.'

John 17: 20 - 26

Jesus prays for all believers

²⁰ 'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – ²³ I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴ 'Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

²⁵ 'Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I have made you^[a] known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.'

Lord, through my ordinary words, carried online and through the air in the English tongue, enable us to hear your living word, encouraging, revealing or challenging as you see fit. Amen.

Sermon

Praying the Pain

So, what were you hoping for, earlier in your life? If you're old enough, what were you dreaming of thirty, forty or fifty years ago? What were you anticipating only ten years ago? How did it turn out?

Were your dreams realised? Have your hopes become real? Or do you feel disappointed with life? Disappointed with church? Might you even feel disappointed with God?

Hannah had reasons to be disappointed. She is named as the first wife of Elkanah, and after her came a second wife, Penninah. Penninah had several children so I guess we might picture Hannah as being about thirty years of age as we imagine this story.

Life had been hard for her. Being unable to have children when you want them is always a huge deal. But it was especially tough for Hannah.

Here are the sources of Hannah's pain:

As we've mentioned, her **natural desire** to hold an infant in her arms was thwarted.

What's more, this deep disappointment was routinely **attributed to God**. God had, in the words of the narrator, *closed her womb*. Her bitterest disappointment with life was to be understood as the deliberate action of God.

Next we hear that her rival wife, Penninah, **repeatedly taunts her**. Verse 6 according to one commentator better translated as something like this: *Penninah taunted her, yes taunted her...* We are to understand the intense meanness of Hannah's co-wife. In the Hebrew, taunting is mentioned three times in verses 6 and 7.

We might think it a bit easier because the husband Elkanah loves Hannah. And you get the feeling he doesn't love Penninah, at least, not so much. But this imbalance created a very **uncomfortable tension** in the air.

Our story takes place at the time of an annual pilgrimage. It may have been at a great festival or could have been a kind of private retreat. If it was the first, we can imagine a busy scene with many families gathering to celebrate at Shiloh.

Now in our culture, family tensions become especially pronounced at Christmas! So we can picture Penninah taunting - yes taunting - her rival about her inability to have kids. There she was, with her several 'perfect' children, all having a great time. Hannah would be with them bodily, but not with them in heart. Feeling alone in a family group at festival time was no joke. We can see her weeping at the family table.

I know, I know, Elkanah tries to comfort her. He gives her a special portion of meat, (though the Hebrew for this portion is extremely vague and translators are only guessing when they say a 'double' portion). But Elkanah does not communicate an understanding of Hannah's needs. He may feel a special affection for her, but he doesn't seem to 'get' what her infertility means to her. *Don't I mean more to you than seven sons?* Well, no! Elkanah is arrogant and self-absorbed and does not listen to his wife's concerns.

It's all too much. After several years of this grim treatment, we see Hannah slipping away from the group and entering the shrine. The old priest Eli is there sitting at the doorway. She passes him and enters the holy place and begins to pray.

And how she prays! She pours out all her confusion and disappointment to God. Her prayer is woven from many threads of anguish and pain. It is intensified by her bitter tears. She does not pray aloud, but in her heart, and her lips move, but no voice emerges.

Inwardly, she does a deal with God. She makes a solemn vow to ratify the deal.

If you will look at me Lord...

If you will remember me...

If you will give me a son...

then I will give him back to you for life,

and no razor will touch his head.

Not shaving was the mark of a holy man, a Nazirite.

She keeps on praying, on and on, her lips moving soundlessly as she expresses years and years of deep disappointment. This is an intimate, honest, heart-felt prayer. She has poured out everything to the one who may yet listen: to God.

What will God say? ...

Oh, nothing, because God is interrupted, ironically enough, by that priest, Eli, who's been sitting at the door. Perhaps he will offer a kindly word of consolation?

No! Instead, he calls her a drunkard and tells her to put away her wine. Well, as I said, it was probably festival time, and doubtless there were a few pilgrims worse for wear, having overindulged in the wine.

But this doesn't excuse Eli's crass and presumptuous behaviour. Again, no one is listening to Hannah.

But then the story turns. To get all the ironies here we need to know a little bit about Eli.

Eli the priest has two wayward sons - they're called scoundrels in the NRSV. They're supposed to be serving as priests ready to inherit Eli's ministry. But rather than being devoted to God, they sleep with the shrine assistants and steal the best food for

themselves. Their reputation is in tatters. If anyone was likely to be a drunkard, well, Eli might have been more on the mark if accused his own sons, Hophni and Phineas.

But here's the irony: As Hannah has made her solemn deal with God, Eli **again** *doesn't listen*. He's not interested in the content of this pilgrim woman's prayer and just blindly and blandly says, *Go in peace, may the God of Israel grant what you have asked*. He can't be bothered to minister to her properly.

May the God of Israel grant what you have asked...

Well Eli, if you had found out what Hannah had asked, you might not have spoken so glibly. Hannah has asked for a son. And she has promised to give him to the Lord's service, 24/7.

Where would he serve God but here at the shrine in Shiloh? Whose ministry might he take over, but that of those silly wicked sons of Eli?

And, as it turns out, when the little boy is born he hears God, and in God's name has to repeat a message foretelling the deaths of Hophni and Phineas and the downfall of Eli's house. This pilgrim woman's private prayer of pain will lead to Eli and his sons being weighed and found wanting, and in them being severely punished for their weakness.

May the God of Israel grant what you have asked. In effect he's saying, may the God of Israel punish my sons and take the priesthood from us. Wow! Note to self: *if you're speaking as a representative of God, you'd better be careful what you say*.

As I have said, Hannah's prayer is essentially a deal offered to God.

If Lord, you do X, then Lord I will do Y.

It's reminiscent of the prayer an atheist might make in dire circumstances. As their life hangs in the balance before surgery, they might offer to go to church every Sunday if only they pull through.

But Hannah's prayer is different. Hers is a prayer of **naked honesty**. And hers is a prayer of **sincere surrender**. When she says the child, if born, would be entirely devoted to God, she means every word.

A preacher on this text might often now lead us to a town in the hill country of Judea, to eavesdrop on a young woman's encounter with an angel. Instead, I want to take us from Shiloh to Jerusalem, where we eavesdrop on another prayer, the prayer of Jesus on the night before his arrest.

John's Jesus prays for something that is at the centre of every human cry. He prays for the unity, the belonging, the oneness for which all people deeply yearn somewhere within their heart.

Now this unity prayer-talk is, frankly, mystifying.

May all those who follow Jesus **be one**.

Just as the **Father is in Jesus** and **Jesus is in the Father**, may they be one.

Later in the prayer: **Jesus will be in the believers**, and the **Father in him** at the same time.

If you try to understand this with your rational mind it's more perplexing than quantum entanglement. The language is perhaps mystical or erotic or biological with this sense of everyone being inside everyone else, and of complete unity being something to pray for. For oneness.

Is the lack of this oneness at the heart of all our pain?

Is this thirst for unity at the heart of all our prayers?

I want to say one more thing about Hannah's prayer. If you're familiar with the Bible you'll know that Elkanah takes Hannah home and makes love to her. By the way, the Hebrew Bible has Elkanah knowing his wife, in the traditional euphemism for making love or sexual intercourse. And again, it's always the man who knows the woman in the biblical references, never a woman knowing a man. Intimate relations, we hope, have changed since those days!

And of course, a son is born, one Samuel, whose name sounds like the Hebrew for *Heard by God*. And appropriately, after he is weaned, Hannah honours her vow to God and presents him at the temple.

And little Samuel **does** speak God's words against the house of Eli.

And Samuel becomes one of the greatest prophets of Israel. He enables kingship to be established and, after a faltering start with one king Saul, he anoints another, the

great David, the poet, musician, warrior and king. And from King David's line comes one Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

So: A woman's womb had been shut by God.

She deeply feels the shame of this refutation of her natural function to raise a child.

She experiences ridicule at the hands of a rival wife.

She endures years of inner agony and the annual ordeal of family festival time.

She is misunderstood by her husband and judged by her priest.

But she pours her pain out to God in entire surrender and deep honesty.

Her first son plays a key role in establishing King David and ultimately in bringing the Saviour into the world.

It seems that the prayer of pain, offered in honesty and with settled surrender to God, can be a key link in the chain of events that leads to something marvellous. It seems that years of rejection, misunderstanding and heartache may be God's stepping-stones towards a better world.

So, do you pray your pain, or hide it away? I can't guarantee that earth-transforming events will follow when you bring your pain to God, but I do know that people who have been entirely honest with God about all that they feel can become channels of healing and compassion for others who may be hurting in comparable ways. And as for Hannah, well, after settling Samuel in the temple, she went on to have three more sons and two daughters. It can take prayer and pain and time to reach the promised land.

And we take our prayer and our pain to God through Jesus, our great High Priest, as we sing, *Before the throne of God above...*

Song (WT 38) **Before the Throne of God Above**

Before the throne of God above,

I have a strong, a perfect plea:

A great high priest whose name is Love,

Who ever lives and pleads for me.

My name is written on his hands,

My name is hidden on his heart;
I know that while in heaven he stands
No power can force me to depart,
No power can force me to depart.

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see him there
Who made an end to all my sin.
Because the sinless Saviour died,
My sinful soul is counted free;
For God, the just, is satisfied
To look on him and pardon me,
To look on him and pardon me.

Behold him there! The risen Lamb,
My perfect sinless righteousness,
The great unchangeable I Am,
The King of glory and of grace!
One with my Lord, I cannot die:
My soul is purchased by his blood,
My life is safe with Christ on high,
With Christ, my Saviour and my God!
With Christ, my Saviour and my God!

Holy Communion

So we are invited to share in the Lord's supper as we each have bread and wine or juice in our respective homes. Jesus says *'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'*

Come to this table, not because you must, but because you may,
Not because you are strong, but because you are weak.

Come, not because any goodness of your own gives you a right to come,
but because you need mercy and help.

Come, because you love the Lord a little and would like to love him more.

Come because he loved you and gave himself for you.

Come and meet the risen Christ, for we are his body.

Let us pray a prayer of confession.

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

The Words of Institution

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Loving God,
We praise and thank you for your love shown to us in Jesus Christ.
We thank you for his life and ministry,
announcing the good news of your kingdom
and demonstrating its power in the lifting of the downtrodden,
and the healing of the sick,

and the loving of the loveless.

We thank you for his sacrificial death upon the cross for the redemption of the world,
and for your raising him to life again, as a foretaste of the glory we shall share.

We thank you for the bread and wine we have in our homes,
symbols of our beautiful world and signs of your transforming love.

Send your Holy Spirit, we pray,
that we may be renewed into the likeness of Jesus Christ
and formed into his body.

This we pray in his name and for his sake. Amen

Peace

As members of one body, Christ calls us to peace.

Let us invest in one another by praying for each other in our hearts now,
and by sharing signs of peace with one another in the coming hours and days.

Sharing

Of the bread Jesus said *This is my body which is for you; do this in memory of me.*

Of the wine Jesus said, *This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever
you drink it, do this in memory of me.*

We share bread and wine,
communing with him and with one another.

Closing Prayer

Father of all,
we give you thanks and praise,
that when we were still far off
you met us in your Son and brought us home.
Dying and living, he declared your love,
gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.
May we who share Christ's body live his risen life;
we who drink his cup bring life to others;
we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world.
Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us,
so we and all your children shall be free,

and the whole earth live to praise your name;
through Christ our Lord.

Amen

Our closing hymn reminds us to call on God throughout our week... *Father God in Heaven*

Hymn (BPW 589) **Father God in Heaven**

Father God in heaven,
Lord most high:
hear your children's prayer,
Lord most high:
hallowed be your name,
Lord most high -
O Lord, hear our prayer.

May your kingdom come
here on earth;
may your will be done
here on earth,
as it is in heaven
so on earth -
O Lord, hear our prayer.

Give us daily bread
day by day,
and forgive our sins
day by day,
as we too forgive
day by day -
O Lord, hear our prayer.

Lead us in your way,
make us strong;
when temptations come
make us strong;
save us from all sin,
keep us strong -
O Lord, hear our prayer.

All things come from you,
all are yours -
kingdom, glory, power,
all are yours;
take our lives and gifts,
all are yours -
O Lord, hear our prayer.

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.