

## Welcome

Gracious God, we are your people, seeking to know you more. Gracious God, come amongst us, by your Spirit, that we might be transformed by our encounter with you. Gracious God, may we go from this place, recognising you in every place and every moment. Amen.<sup>i</sup>

## Song

From the breaking of the dawn  
To the setting of the sun,  
I will stand on every promise of your word.  
Words of power, strong to save,  
That will never pass away;  
I will stand on every promise of your word.  
For your covenant is sure,  
And on this I am secure:  
I can stand on every promise of your word.

When I stumble and I sin,  
Condemnation pressing in,  
I will stand on every promise of your word.  
You are faithful to forgive,  
That in freedom I might live,  
So I stand on every promise of your word.  
Guilt to innocence restored;  
You remember sins no more.  
So I'll stand on every promise of your word.

When I'm faced with anguished choice  
I will listen for your voice,  
and I'll stand on every promise of your word.  
Through this dark and troubled land,  
you will guide me with your hand  
as I stand on every promise of your word.  
And you've promised to complete  
every work begun in me,  
so I'll stand on every promise of your word.

Hope that lifts me from despair;  
Love that casts out every fear  
As I stand on every promise of your word.  
Not forsaken, not alone,  
For the Comforter has come,  
And I stand on every promise of your word.  
Grace sufficient, grace for me,  
Grace for all who will believe.  
We will stand on every promise of your word.<sup>ii</sup>

## Prayers & The Lord's Prayer

Generous God, we marvel at your extravagance in bestowing blessings on us, and we are in awe of your generosity. Thank you for the gift of Jesus, who, time and again, demonstrated your propensity for giving. Forgive us for those times when we have acted selfishly, thinking only of ourselves instead of our fellow humans. Help us to be a people of extravagant generosity, especially when we find it difficult to do so. Open our hearts to love and goodness and make us a people of goodwill and kindness, so that all we encounter, will experience something of your love and care for them. Amen.<sup>iii</sup>

We say together 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.**

## Introduction to the Theme

Sometimes our friendship groups are made up of people who look, sound and think like us. Sometimes we find it safer to be with people who are like us because we think we understand them better. Sometimes we go as far as being mean or even bullying those people who are different, often because we're fearful of difference. But this is not God's way and shouldn't be what the Church is like. Even among the people that were following Jesus – his first disciples – there were people who didn't really believe, even though they seemed to look the part. Jesus knew this. Even in the twelve that Jesus selected there was at least one person who looked the part, but didn't really follow the teachings of Jesus. That was Judas who betrayed Jesus. Jesus' followers are not about how we look or whether we fit in, it's about what's in our heart. Do we believe in Jesus as the Son of God? That's the important question. The reading from the book of Kings affirms this approach to the people of God. It talks about 'foreigners' meaning those who weren't part of the nation of Israel. It doesn't say that they should be kept on the outside; it says that they should be welcomed into the people of God. If they are seeking God, whoever they might be, they are welcome among the people of God. That's a difficult challenge for us when we feel safer surrounded by people

who are like us in many ways. But it's actually more important to think about what's in people's hearts – some people call this their values. It's about who they are as people, not what they look like or the labels they might have. This is the gospel of Christ that all who seek God are welcome in the Church, whatever their race, sexuality, gender, whether rich or poor, disabled, young or old – whoever they are. The challenge for us is to show this in our own churches so that all people know they are welcome.<sup>iv</sup>

## Readings

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak. **(Ephesians 6:10-20)**

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." **(John 6:56-69)**

## Song:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
His mercies never come to an end;  
They are new every morning, new every morning,  
Great is thy faithfulness, O Lord,  
Great is thy faithfulness.  
(Repeat)<sup>v</sup>

## Reflection

Ashley Cooper

"Called into the presence of God"

The videos can be viewed at [Burley Methodist Church Online - YouTube](#) & [www.wandamethodists.org.uk](http://www.wandamethodists.org.uk)

Alternatively, the written text is provided below

## Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we come to you as the one who created the laws and offered grace in abundance. Lord, we pray for our Christian brothers and sisters around the world. We lift them to you as they seek to follow the commandments of your gospel and great commission. May they be strengthened and emboldened for the mission you have called them to. Cleanse and mould your Church into the likeness of Christ.

(Pause).

Bring peace and safety to our world, in particular to the places of the world where laws have been leveraged for revenge and gain. Open paths of reconciliation and heal the brokenness. Repair the war-torn cities and countries and make a way for those who have been displaced to find a place to call home again.

We pray for the 65 million plus refugees around the world who are on their journey. Lord, whose Son became a refugee and had no place to call his own; look with mercy on those who today are fleeing from danger. Bless those who work to bring them relief.

Lord, bring healing and reconciliation to marriages and peace to those who have experienced broken relationships. Lord, repair trust and build bridges of communication so love may flow.

(Pause) Lord, teach us to love our neighbour. In a moment of silence, we think of those who we would consider a neighbour and place them into your hands.

(Pause for a minute)

Lord, teach us to be quick to forgive and acknowledge our own mistakes. Above all else, inspire us to live in the likeness of your Son Jesus Christ. In your mercy, hear our prayer, Amen.<sup>vi</sup>

## Hymn

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds  
In a believer's ear!  
It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds,  
And drives away our fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole,  
And calms the troubled breast;  
'tis manna to the hungry soul,  
And to the weary, rest.

Dear name – the rock on which I build,  
My shield and hiding-place,  
My never-failing treasury, filled  
With boundless stores of grace!

Jesus! My Shepherd, Brother, Friend,  
My Prophet, Priest and King,  
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,  
Accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart,  
And cold my warmest thought;  
But when I see thee as thou art,  
I'll praise thee as I ought.

Till then I would thy love proclaim  
With every fleeting breath;  
And may the music of thy name  
Refresh my soul in death.<sup>vii</sup>

## Blessing

Go from this place inspired, Go from this place renewed, Go from this place with the Spirit of God alongside, within and all around you, Go from this place, a child of the Living God. Amen.<sup>viii</sup>

## Reflection

Called into the presence of God

Ashley Cooper

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God. Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.

Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed.

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness. For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favour and honour. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you. **(Psalm 84)**

Many people believe that the author of today's Psalm (84) was trapped in a place where he couldn't get to God's temple – probably in captivity or separated from the temple because of war. And that's why he wrote, 'my soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord.' 'I wish I could be there!' I wish I could be in God's temple, because that is where God is... You get that sense of pain from this author, as he just says – I want to be there! I want to be in God's presence, but there is a sense here that he can't get there.

I would guess that the journey of the last couple of years for many has been one of distance, one of longing, of yearning and pain; and trying to find our way into the presence of God, our normal routes, our places of worship and encounter have been ripped away from us – and many have struggled to find their way to keep their faith, to hold on.

This Psalm is really a call into the presence of God – setting your sight, and your goal, on reaching him. How have you done that these past months? Have you struggled? Have you found new and creative ways into God's presence? As we move forward, we need to realise that our focus is not on 'where do we go to on a Sunday' (and I recognise that those buildings are helpful and precious to many of us), but ultimately, our focus is 'whose presence do I desire, and yearn for?'

Three times a year, the Jews were to return to Jerusalem to meet with God. At the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. And so, as the Jews made their way to Jerusalem to meet with God, they had to pass through this Valley of Baca that the Psalm mentions: this desert place. The word 'Baca' means tears, so this is 'The Valley of Tears'. Travellers would have probably already travelled a long distance, they would be tired, and then staring them in the face is this desert that they have to cross in order to reach Jerusalem. By its name, we can assume it would bring tears to their faces.

Just think about those Jewish travellers, making that journey to Jerusalem three times a year. Each time, they arrived in Jerusalem totally spent. Their focus had been getting there, at all costs. If the long trip on foot didn't get to them, the last part through the Valley of Baca would certainly do them in. They arrive on empty – nothing in their tanks. They are on empty as they come to meet with God. And they literally, many of them, fall into his presence – desperate people, having pushed through, having kept going...to meet with God.

I wonder how desperate you are, to meet with God? I wonder what you would do to get into the presence of God? I don't mean ritual or routine, or what we 'do' on a Sunday morning. I think what these last years have taught us, is that actually we don't want to 'go through the motions' of church anymore, we need to push into the presence of God and settle for nothing less. To shout at the top of our voices: 'there must be more than this!'. This ritual and routine that we are going through – is this it? No! We push into the presence of God, and we will do whatever it takes to get into that presence.

So the question I just briefly want to answer is: what does it take to get through my Valley of Tears with God? How do we push into God's presence?

For many, these last few years has felt like a desert place. There is lots in this Psalm, but time allows me to pull out a couple of things that might help us here. A couple of things I want you to notice: first, verse 5 tells us that these Jewish people 'set their hearts on pilgrimage', on the journey – they were not going to settle until they got to the presence of God, that was the purpose of the pilgrimage. Anything less was not acceptable. They set their heart on the journey that got them there. In Genesis 32 there is a great story that Jacob wrestled with God, and Jacob set his mind that he was not going to let go until God has blessed him. In other words, Jacob was not going to settle – he set his mind that he was going to be blessed by God, and God did indeed bless him by changing his name from Jacob to Israel. And Jacob named this place where all this occurred as Peniel, because he has seen God's face and his life was spared. Setting your heart, and your face to God – meeting with him being your priority. Settling for nothing less.

Think about your life, do you settle way before you meet with God? Do you settle for worship that does not bring you into God's presence? Do you settle for ritual and routine that says more about tradition than about encounter? The Jews could have easily said, when they got to Valley of Baca – this is too hard, and turned around to go back home. But instead, they set their hearts to pilgrimage, to not stopping until they got to Zion. If you and I turn around before we meet with God, it is because we settled, before setting our minds that 'nothing is going to stop me from meeting with God.' So, we set our hearts on pilgrimage, into the presence of God.

The second thing the Psalmist says to us today is, that he needs to know where he will find his help along the way. 'Blessed are those whose strength is in you'. My help on this journey comes from God himself.

Whenever you take a trip, you plan certain things along the way: if it's a long trip, you plan where you might stop for the night, if it's a shorter trip you plan where you might eat. As I set my heart and my mind to reach the presence of God, I need to know where I might find my strength along the journey.

We get that Psalm from David, don't we – 121 – 'I lift my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord'. My help on this journey comes from God. We get that also in Isaiah 40: 'But those who wait on the Lord, shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall run and not faint'. They won't give up, they won't give in, they won't fail, they will keep going.

God showed me something when I was preparing this message, that I didn't know, the word 'wait' is the word 'qawa', which means: 'to wait', but also to means 'to be attached to' or 'to be gathered to'. It is a picture of the grapevines in that region that needed to be attached to sticks, because they are not able to hold themselves up. And, didn't Jesus himself say: we are the vines (we need the support) and he is the branch (the support that we need). Jesus is the one who holds us up, to give us the support and the strength we need. Our strength does not come from ourselves, but from God.

As they press on, as they renew their strength, they reach their destination and recognise that 'better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.' This is the place to push into. This is the place to fall into. This is the place to encounter God. And the minute you do, everything makes sense. Just listen to the words, when you get there: 'He is a sun and shield. He bestows favour and honour. No good thing does he withhold.' They are the things that are at our destination, in the presence of God. Good things, abundantly.

I simply encourage you today to focus on God, and encounter him. When was the last time you rested in God's presence? Trust in him as you push forwards – know that he is your strength. Wait on him, and fall into God's presence. It's worth it! Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Written by Tim Baker.

<sup>ii</sup> Words and Music by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, 2005, Thankyou Music. StF 156

<sup>iii</sup> Written by Ramona Samuel.

<sup>iv</sup> Written by Gary Hopkins.

<sup>v</sup> Words and Music by Edith McNeil, 1974, The Community of Celebration, StF 66

<sup>vi</sup> Written by Mathew Forsyth.

<sup>vii</sup> Words by John Newton, Music by Alexander Reinagle, StF 321.

<sup>viii</sup> Written by Tim Baker.

Burley in Wharfedale Methodist Church CCLI. 12475