



Flourishing in God's World: Looking at ministry where we live and work

Call to worship

Loving God, we come to worship. You have called each of us by name, we belong to you. Pour out your Spirit on us, we pray, that we may know your love and our belovedness today.

Song: StF 471

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

*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.

Hold me close...
Geoff Bullock (b. 1956)

Prayers of praise and confession

Lord, you enfold us before we know it. You know us by name long before we hear your call. We belonged to you from the first; the welcome was always waiting. In astonished joy, we realise that we are beloved, and we turn from our ways to yours.

The last two years have wrecked and reconfigured our lives in many ways. As we emerge and look to flourish in your name, we confess, at times, we feel lost. An arid wilderness lies before us, bereft of certainties we thought secure, and we must search for spiritual succour to help us journey through this wasteland. But because we are exhausted, Lord, and our heads droop, because our faith is faltering we want short cuts, quick results, instant gratification.

Forgive us, Lord, for seeking renewal in the wrong places. We raise our faces to you, O Lord, for in you we belong and are known and loved, even when we no longer know who or where we really are. Call us by name. Renew us that we may play our part in restoring your world so that it will grow and flourish for all.
Amen.

Consider:

*Where is God's world in which we flourish? – is the answer everywhere, or are there any no go areas? Do we perhaps feel that our world today encourages no go areas for faith?
A song now to perhaps challenge any such notion!*

Song: StF 659

As dawn awakes another day,
the working sphere rolls into view,
and all attention centres on
the many tasks we have to do.

Distracted by demands of time,
and squeezed by pressures, deadlines, needs,
there's scarcely any space or thought
for you from whom all life proceeds.

You challenge some to leave their nets
and follow unfamiliar ways,

but most are called to live their faith
in humdrum tasks of working days.

Affirm us, Lord, as we employ
our hands and minds in every place,
let worship flow through busyness,
responding to your love and grace.

Your patience is our endless hope,
your Spirit present to inspire,
the freedom to explore your truth,
your loving service our desire.

Clare Stainsby (b. 1959)

Reading – Exodus 31.1-11

The first of our two readings introduces a narrative of the gifts of God's grace in time and faith, helping all to grow and flourish.

The LORD said to Moses, "I have chosen Bezalel, the son of Uri and grandson of Hur, from the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with my power. I have given him understanding, skill, and ability for every kind of artistic work— for planning skillful designs and working them in gold, silver, and bronze; for cutting jewels to be set; for carving wood; and for every other kind of artistic work. I have also selected Oholiab son of Ahisamach, from the tribe of Dan, to work with him. I have also given great ability to all the other skilled workers, so that they can make everything I have commanded to be made: the Tent of my presence, the Covenant Box and its lid, all the furnishings of the Tent, the table and its equipment, the lampstand of pure gold and all its equipment, the altar for burning incense, the altar for burnt offerings and all its equipment, the washbasin and its base, the magnificent priestly garments for Aaron and his sons to use when they serve as priests, the anointing oil, and the sweet-smelling incense for the Holy Place. In making all these things, they are to do exactly as I have commanded you."

Reflection. *By God's grace people have always flourished where they live and work in God's world.*

There are many references within both the Old and New Testaments to using skills given by God to flourish and to grow. In this passage the skills given to those mentioned are very specifically stated. It's generally accepted that the Book of Exodus was written between 600 and 400 BC, during the period of exile in Babylon. It was likely based on oral traditions relating to these events which may themselves have dated back a thousand years to the time of exodus from Egypt.

Bezalel's, and the other craftsmen's, qualifications come to them from Yaweh/God in two ways. They are called **and** are filled with the divine spirit. The gifts of grace from God are usually referred to as bestowing qualities of leadership and prophecy but, as in this passage, clearly not confined to these. The emphasis on precious metals and jewels may seem a little jarring but the materials and design of the Tabernacle and its furniture were important because they give it its holy character, indeed the same would go on to apply to the constituents of the Temple itself, God's dwelling place by the Jewish tradition. Thus, it is appropriate to regard the skills which were given to these individuals as a divine gift, importantly, freely given. So, by using these skills in their places of work it is surely reasonable to suggest that Bezalel and his co-workers were performing an act of ministry to the people. This would not be so that the people could merely admire the quality of the materials and workmanship, although that would not necessarily be inappropriate (*admiration in the right context is surely important to acknowledge how God gifts others with skills to serve his Kingdom*), but so that they could literally come closer to God where he was, very much in his world according to the understanding of the time.

Our understanding of God's world, some three and a half millennia later, and in a very different place, may seem to bear little similarity to that in this passage from Exodus. However, I would suggest that the principles of using God's gifts of grace, wherever and whenever we receive them and in whatever form they come to us, to further God's kingdom and to help others to come to him remain the same!

We move on now in our narrative some 1500 years or so to the 1st century AD, of itself a very different time to that in the Exodus passage, and to today.

Reading. Acts 9. 32-43

Peter travelled everywhere, and on one occasion he went to visit God's people who lived in Lydda. There he met a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had not been able to get out of bed for eight years. "Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ makes you well. Get up and make your bed."

At once Aeneas got up. All the people living in Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

In Joppa there was a woman named Tabitha, who was a believer. (Her name in Greek is Dorcas, meaning "a deer.") She spent all her time doing good and helping the poor. At that time she got sick and died. Her body was washed and laid in a room upstairs. Joppa was not very far from Lydda, and when the believers in Joppa heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him with the message, "Please hurry and come to us."

So Peter got ready and went with them. When he arrived, he was taken to the room upstairs, where all the widows crowded around him, crying and showing him all the shirts and coats that Dorcas had made while she was alive. Peter put them all out of the room and knelt down and prayed; then he turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up!"

She opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. Peter reached over and helped her get up. Then he called all the believers, including the widows, and presented her alive to them. The news about this spread all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed on in Joppa for many days with a tanner of leather named Simon.

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Reflection. *Flourishing in God's world with Jesus – 1st century AD perspective.*

It seems appropriate to the theme of today that we should have a reading from the book of *Acts*! This passage comes shortly after Saul's conversion on the Damascus road, and at a time of peace during which the early church grew in numbers and spread, dare I say flourished! Peter is the chief figurehead and appears to have a pastoral oversight over the young church.

These two miracle stories clearly echo the healing miracles of Jesus, but Peter is careful to stress that he acts in Jesus's name. So, the early church flourishes, not in a holy of holies, but out and about in the everyday world, God's everyday world. Peter heals, a very physical ministry, and inspirational to all the people he met and who heard of his actions in Jesus's name. But we can't all heal, or raise people to life, and we all will die so there is another important person in the *Acts* passage who illustrates the importance of being in God's world, ministering to others in his name, where they lived and worked.

The church community in Joppa, in this passage, is described in rather more detail than that at Lydda. The focus is on Tabitha/Dorcas, who is specifically identified as a believer. She had also developed a charitable ministry among the women of the town who, at a time with no social security, could find themselves in severe financial difficulties. Tabitha's clothing club is described in commentaries as a prototype for the extensive practical aid programmes that grew up in the later church and which, indeed, we see continuing today.

It is interesting to reflect that two of the fundamental pillars of our society, health and education, come directly from the tradition that Tabitha and others like her established as they came to believe in and follow Christ! It's also surely important to say that in these current times, even in rich countries such as ours, similar schemes have been essential in recent years, to provide support for those in need. Provision for support for food and clothing come to mind, true necessities for anyone in need, whether they be here or elsewhere. And in that support an inspired example of ministry in God's love to those in need is shown.

But Tabitha became sick and died. It seems clear that she was held in such regard by those who knew her, perhaps in the main through her ministry, that they appealed to Peter who was nearby. And the healing miracle took place, through Peter's actions but in Jesus's name.

And so, the theme of using the gifts of God's grace continues. The ministry of both Peter and Tabitha takes place in plain sight in God's world and the people of the early church grew and flourished as a result. What of more recent times and today? Before we reflect further, we will sing a song that talks very much of how we are all called to follow Jesus, and to grow and flourish in faith by doing so.

Hymn: StF 660

Called by Christ to be disciples
every day in every place,
we are not to hide as hermits
but to spread the way of grace ;
citizens of heaven's kingdom,
though this world is where we live,
as we serve a faithful Master,
faithful service may we give.

Richly varied are our pathways,
many callings we pursue :
may we use our gifts and talents
always, Lord, to honour you ;

so in government or commerce,
college, hospice, farm or home,
whether volunteers or earning,
may we see your kingdom come.

Hard decisions may confront us,
urging us to compromise ;
still obedience is our watchword —
make us strong and make us wise !
Secular is turned to sacred,
made a precious offering,
as our daily lives are fashioned
in submission to our King.

Martin Leckebusch (b. 1962)

Reflection. *Flourishing in God's world now. Who do we know or have heard of who embodies the words of this song/hymn?*

We have hopefully been inspired by the everyday ministry in God's world we have heard about in our scripture readings. I would like now to turn our thoughts to our own experiences. Who would we think of as showing ministry where they lived and worked? I'm going to take worship leaders prerogative with three short examples which resonate with me personally.

Firstly, Eric Liddell. I suspect most of you will have heard of Eric Liddell, if not from the Oscar winning film from 40 years ago, then from elsewhere. I know of him in a way that almost feels personal because he worshipped in the church in Edinburgh where I grew up in faith, Morningside Congregational Church, now Morningside United Church. Indeed, he is commemorated in a specifically commissioned stained glass window in the church. More obviously and importantly, I suggest, he is remembered through the *Eric Liddell Centre*, a community-based project in one of the church buildings in what is known as Holy Corner. That centre has as its heart Christian real world-based service to those in need. Eric Liddell had many gifts which he freely acknowledged he had because of God's grace. He flourished in faith, I would suggest, both because he made sure he used his athletic gifts to the best of his ability, but also because he served as best he could the people of China as a missionary where he lived and worked and died.

In a similar vein, but closer to home, I want to tell you about Rev Tracy. We who went to Iona last Summer met Rev Tracy from Bradford who was with us as part of the *Braving the Elements* programme. Tracy is, a force of God's nature! Down to earth and inspirational are the words I would use to describe Tracy. The stories that she told of her ministry in the deprived parts of Bradford were at the same time extraordinary, inspirational and challenging. We could be here all day telling these stories but the one I would particularly like to relate is when Tracy describes when she was in a pub in Buttershaw. She was talking to the people about her faith and told them that God loved them, perhaps a straightforward idea to us who have spent our lives in the church community. But the idea that God loved them both surprised and inspired them. Nobody had told them that before. Good on you Tracy!

And finally, perhaps we are familiar with God being with us in this world, but perhaps shielded from what others would suggest is the reality of today, the real world that others experience. I would like to share the exceptionally challenging story of Mark Bracewell, which I first read about last weekend, so that we might think about this in the context of our looking at ministry where we live and work.

Mark is not necessarily someone you might expect to meet strolling along the Grove in Ilkley! His story comes from the *Guardian Angel* series in the Guardian newspaper. Mark grew up in Moss Side in Manchester in the 1980's. He witnessed what you and I would surely think of as horrendous experiences, including seeing a friend of his killed in a takeaway, likely as a case of mistaken identity. He records his experience as like living in a war zone and so, perhaps unsurprisingly, he turned to how he might survive, taking drugs and being involved in criminality that led him to spending the best part of four years in prison.

He got out of prison and started to rebuild his life. But on New Year's Eve in 2016 he was involved in a fight and was stabbed in his left eye, losing the sight in that eye, and indeed the eye itself, for ever. He describes this as a turning point, he cried out to God, "I don't want to die", and he says he heard God say to him, "You won't die. I need you to see."

He was released from prison and, through support from a Christian charity called *Walk Ministries*, which works with ex-offenders, his Christian faith was reawakened. The charity got him a placement doing youth volunteer work and he became an anti-knife crime campaigner. He talks of a certain symmetry, "*The crime I went to prison for involved a knife and I was stabbed with a knife. God is using me as a tool.*"

Mark goes into secondary schools. He talks about the statistics of knife crime, horrendous as they are, but also about his own experiences. He tells them that the decisions they make have consequences, consequences they will have to live with as he has had to live with the decisions he made. He has co-founded an organisation called *Blinded Faith*, working with at risk children, perhaps as he would have recognised himself growing up. He does one-to-one sessions with the kids who are vulnerable to knife crime. He says that he can't get anywhere unless he builds a relationship of trust, without that, without him being there for them, there is no response from the kids, they won't trust him or give anything back. He says, "There are no bad kids, just kids who are making bad choices."

I know that there are many extraordinary examples of ministry in God's world where we live and work, but I simply find it difficult to think of one that moves me more than that of Mark Bracewell's. God's world in all its gritty everyday detail, God's grace in all its astonishing beauty!

Surely these are inspirational but challenging examples of ministry where those described lived and worked. Where might we find where we could do something similar? This poem, which is also a prayer, might help us in this.

Poem: *Fit me in somewhere*

Fit me in somewhere in this giant jigsaw, God, somewhere in this work of art you're working,
Select a space my shape can fill and with a puzzle maker's skill let my contours find their fit without contortion.

Teach me which patch I am, God, in the cosmic quilt you're quilting. Show me where my square of selfhood is of use.

Let the colourful complexities of the pattern that is me find their purpose in the placement you choose.

Show me my position, God, in this group photograph. Stand me where you want me to stand.
Put me next to whom you will. Make me stand, for good or ill, precisely in the place your plan demands.

Tell me what I am, God, in this body you are building: a tongue to taste, a nerve to serve, an ear to hear.
Give me grace to not be, gracefully, the parts I am not called to be and to play with elegance the roles I'm given.

Fit me in somewhere in this giant jigsaw, God, somewhere in this work of art you're working.
Weave your wondrous tapestry until the twisted, tangled threads of me, are surrendered to your artistry,
And form an image that is beautiful to see.
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Prayers for others & the Lord's Prayer

Lord, we pray that you will send us out into your world with love to those who know no love.
Send us to bring your joy to those who need it most.
Send us with peace to those who know only anger and hatred.
Send us with forbearance to those who test our patience.
Send us with kindness to those who do not know what kindness is.
Send us with goodness, so that people see more of you.
Send us out with faithfulness, never forgetting our purpose in the world.
Send us out with gentleness to those who feel they might shatter like eggshells.
Lord, we pray that you will send us out into your world with your Spirit, so that you, our loving Lord, will always be at the heart of all we do and say. Send us, Lord. **Amen**

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.

Hymn: StF 673

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.
John L. Bell (b. 1949) and Graham Maule (1958 -
2021)

Sending out prayer and Blessing

Now go from here and God go with you. May Christ companion you, the Spirit enliven you and may you know and show God's presence today and everyday. **Amen**

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Questions to consider:

- What examples of ministry where you live, and work can you see?
- What God given talents can you see in others...and yourself?!
- How might we celebrate and support people in using their talents for ministry in God's world?