



Personal Flourishing

Call to Worship

As we worship, let us be sincere in heart, filled with faith, and concerned for one another.

Hymn StF 470

Lord, for the years your love has kept and
guided,
Urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
Sought us and saved us, pardoned and
provided:
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.

Lord, for that word, the word of life which fires
us,
Speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,
Teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us:
Lord of the word, receive Your people's praise.

Lord, for our land in this our generation,
Spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care:

For young and old, for commonwealth and
nation,
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.

Lord, for our world when we disown and doubt
him,
Loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,
Hungry and helpless, lost indeed without him:
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.

Lord for ourselves; in living power remake us -
Self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,
Past put behind us, for the future take us:
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone
Timothy Dudley Smith 1926 –

Prayers

A prayer for the flourishing of all creation

Joyful God, we adore you for the astonishing hope you offer, that even in the dry desert shall rejoice and blossom. We delight in your exuberant and ever shining glory, which cannot be contained. We praise you for your extravagant and priceless gifts, gifts of strength, peace and salvation. We celebrate your merciful and miraculous healing, as eyes are opened and ears unstopped, as the lame leap like deer and the speechless speak. We sing of your fresh, life giving water, flowing in the wilderness, transforming each one of us for your glory. As we look to all that you have done and all that you will do, right now, here in this moment, you offer us life in all it's fullness, calling us to walk your way of holiness, a road that leads to the flourishing of all creation. **Amen**

A prayer of Confession

Let us confess our sins to God.

God in his son has set us free and raised us from death to life; yet we have not lived in this freedom as his children, and have resisted his grace at work in us. Let us turn to God and ask his forgiveness.

Silence

Lord God, nothing is hidden from you. Others see our outward actions but you alone read our hearts and minds. You see our motives and intentions, both those we know and those hidden from others and ourselves. Grant us the grace of your Spirit, that we may not be deceived, nor think our lives are unknown to you. What is gracious and good in us, confirm; what is lacking, supply; what is weak, restore and renew; what we repent of, forgive. We ask this thought Christ our Lord, **Amen**

Introduction

As you know, the circuit has invited us to 'flourish' and a small group has prepared resources for us all to reflect upon if we wish to do so. You have all, hopefully, received a card and a journal to aid your reflections where you will find one of the prayers above.

I want to ask you a question! – and don't be bashful in your response! What are you good at? Or put a different way - Where do your gifts and skills lie?

I wonder if you've ever done one of those personality assessments which tell you what kind of person you are? I must be the only minister on the planet never to have done the Myers Briggs one! But the similar assessments I have carried out have been about conflict situations and they always tell me that I am a peacemaker! Who are we and who are we meant to be?

Flourishing as a human being surely must have something to do with reaching our potential – recognising and using the gifts and skills we have been given which hopefully create a meaningful and purposeful life. Being in a job where our gifts are neither recognised nor used doesn't exactly add up to job satisfaction does it? But why is it so important to think about this theme within the context of church?

I think the team who have put together the materials for the Flourish programme were inspired to do so, partly because of the difficult times we find ourselves in, not just due to Covid, but generally within the church – falling numbers, fewer people to take on the roles which need filling etc. They wanted to, as the card says, encourage church communities to think about thriving not simply surviving. What does that mean for you as you read this service?

Well, I'm not asking about gifts because I'm trying to recruit folk into church jobs – that's not what this is about! I want to focus on what it means to thrive, to flourish personally, especially in difficult times. We are never too old to continue on the journey of self discovery or of faith. We might get weary and have moments when we want to reach journey's end. But today's theme is about realising how precious we are to God as individuals and how precious we should be to one another, not because we are keeping the church going, but because we are all here to offer who we are to God and to one another, inside and outside the church.

Amid worrying times, we can lose sight of our unique contribution, especially during the lockdowns, we can begin to feel isolated and even useless. What does it mean for us all to flourish at this time? How can we enable one another to grow together in God and *work* and *be* alongside one another to flourish in his name and his strength?

Hymn StF 513

Take this moment, sign and space;
take my friends around;
here among us make the place
where Your love is found.

Take the time to call my name,
take the time to mend
who I am and what I've been,
all I've failed to tend.

Take the tiredness of my days,
take my past regret,

letting Your forgiveness touch
all I can't forget.

Take the little child in me,
scared of growing old;
help me here to find my worth
made in Christ's own mould.

Take my talents, take my skills
take what's yet to be;
let my life be Yours, and yet,
let it still be me.

John Bell 1949 and Graham Maule 1958

Readings

Psalm 139: 13 – 18, 23 and 24

For it was you who formed my inward parts, you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Matthew 16 : 13 – 20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

POEM : Called to Become

You are called to become a perfect creation.

No one is called to become who you are called to be.

It does not matter how short or tall, or thick set or slow you may be.

It does not matter whether you sparkle with life or are silent as a still pool,
whether you sing your song aloud or weep alone in the darkness.

It does not matter whether you feel loved and admired or unloved and alone,
For you are called to become a perfect creation.

No one's shadow should cloud your becoming,
no one's light should dispel your spark.

For the Lord delights in you, jealously looks upon you and encourages with gentle
joy, every movement of the spirit within you.

Unique and loved you stand, beautiful or stunted in your growth, but never without
hope or life.

For you are called to become a perfect creation.

This becoming may be gentle or harsh, subtle or violent,

But it never ceases, never pauses or hesitates,

Only is –

Creative force –

Calling you

Calling you to become a perfect creation.

Poem by Edwina Gately from 'Called to Care – the pastoral Care Handbook of the Methodist Church' edited by Ann Bird, MPH 1996

Hymn StF 714

The God who sings
a new world into being shows the way
for many voices, varied gifts to sound
in symphony.

The God who shouts
in fury when the powerful shame the poor
will break the chains, and those who hide in fear
he will restore.

The God who weeps
when fields are barren and the missiles fall
throw wide his arms and offers in his love

refuge for all.

The God who laughs
as unexpected overturns routine
releases us to risk in faith, and find
what joy can mean.

The God who calls
in hearts of those who hear his Chosen One
forgives, transforms, empowers, renews us
while
we journey on.

Douglas Galbraith 1940 -

Reflection

Now I'm guessing that some of you are thinking that the word flourish perhaps means good health, good mental wellbeing, successful even, good sense of purpose – perhaps simply a contentment with life? And I also guess that some of you are wanting to point out that due to various circumstances, you, or those you know are far from flourishing at present.

A friend of mine is currently on a phased return to work after time off with depression. The depression is due to a build-up of all kinds of things in his life, but partly because, basically he's in the wrong job for him. He isn't fulfilled at work and certainly doesn't feel appreciated.

This begs the question: What contributes to our ability to flourish? In my friend's case it might be recognition of a job well done, or some appreciation for his work. For others it might be really good support, the feeling that someone has your back! I know that the response from one of my friend's friends was, 'You just need to think positive thoughts!' They meant well, but as many of us know, the way out of depression is never just thinking positive thoughts! If it were that simple, everyone would have brilliant

mental well-being all the time! The response didn't help him because the friend didn't understand – which made my friend feel misunderstood himself.

I have grown very close to my next-door neighbour – particularly over the last year when her husband has been very ill and sadly died in October. One of her phrases when we are together is that she loves being with me because, and I quote, 'You get me'.

Having that person or people who understand you enables you to thrive and grow because you feel believed, but also because that belief gives you self-worth. A sort of recognition occurs between people which leads them to feeling appreciated and to take another step along life's journey towards finding a place, finding where they fit.

So flourishing is much more than just great physical or mental health. It's about much more than success, wealth, and material things. The actions which most deprive people of their ability to flourish are those which take away someone's dignity, or worth. Actions which intentionally or not, take away their self-worth and their reasons for living.

We live in an intensely competitive world – a world in which many seek the number one position – whether that be in the world of work, or study or simply in a friendship or family group. Where being number one matters or being in control does at any rate. I won't be the only one to be with our Prime Minister at present. Recent events have shown him in a particularly bad light and seemingly insensitive to the plight of those he is supposed to serve.

And look at the state of Afghanistan. I was in tears as I watched the news recently which showed pictures of malnourished children in hospital and learned yet more of the catastrophic political situation. Food is in the shops apparently, but 50% of the population don't have enough money to buy it. All for a regime which seeks to control others, not encourage them to flourish and become who they are meant to be.

But what has all this got to do with our readings? Well, we pick up from the verses of the Psalm that God 'knows us', he loves us and to use my neighbour's phrase, 'he gets us'! He created us, he wants us to be the best versions of ourselves we can be. But we can't do that on our own. We can't follow the way of the world which says 'me, me, me'. There must be another way. As Christians, we have discovered this other way which is about setting aside self for the good and the flourishing of another. Living in this way of giving and serving, we then discover personal flourishing as we fulfil the will of God through 'getting' other people.

How do we do that? We try to travel alongside them; listen and appreciate their experiences even if we don't understand them. We don't say 'think positive thoughts' – we say – 'that must be awful for you, please tell me how you see what's happening so I can better understand.'

And then to our gospel reading. The very well-known passage about the revealing of Jesus' identity. The important verse for our service theme this morning is 17 – 'Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven'.

If we are open to God's spirit, we too will make discoveries about ourselves and about others which will lead us to realise how loved and valued we are. And it's this knowledge, I believe which will lead us to flourish as God's disciples.

Often when using this passage, the preacher will focus on the question, 'who do you say that I am' and will turn it around to those in the congregation and ask 'so who do you all think Jesus is?' My question to you (and myself) is, 'Who do people say YOU are?' What do people see in you (and me) which indicates who we follow in life?

Jesus reveals who he is through Peter who discovers this through being in touch with God in his personal life. We can't presume he 'gets' Jesus because it's clear that he and the other disciples don't – but he is on the journey of doing so.

An elderly lady I was visiting once told me that someone had once asked her if she was a Christian. Her response was 'I'm working on it'. That's all we can do isn't it? We can never totally 'get' God or Jesus, but we can try through whatever means are available to us, to try and understand. Why? Because it is through

the glimpses we have of God that we can discover our sense of self and place in the world; the reality of what it is to live a life in him and alongside others. We discover what it's like to flourish.

Now, I know what you're thinking! I have the great privilege of having my health, enough to eat, shelter, loving friends, and family. The ability to read and to learn and a wealth of books and amazing theologians and colleagues to learn from. I have everything going for me. What about one of those children starving in Afghanistan. What about the gentleman I met on the corridor in a sheltered housing scheme the other day whose mobility isn't what it was who smiled and said to me, 'It's all downhill from here'! He was, having said that, very positive and grateful for the life he had lived.

But how can I write about flourishing when we all know of many people across the globe who seem to be doing the total opposite? I know I stated that flourishing isn't about wealth, health, and success, but an awareness of self and our place in the world. But how does a starving or oppressed person discover their identity and their purpose in life? You want the answer, don't you? Well, I haven't got one! What I do have is a faith which informs me that it is my duty to help those God brings to me to 'get them' – to attempt to walk alongside them. In doing so we all discover self-flourishing and working together, can make a difference to our church community, our society and ultimately our world if we do what we can to make sure that things are in place to enable flourishing for all. And we must remember when we become disillusioned – that we are always 'working on it' until our earthly work is done! Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

For our prayers I invite you to reflect on the words of the following hymn:

Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in endless praise.

Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect and use
Every pow'r as Thou shalt choose.

Take my hands and let them move
At the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet and let them be
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my will and make it Thine,
It shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is Thine own,
It shall be Thy royal throne.

Take my voice and let me sing,
Always, only for my King.
Take my lips and let them be
Filled with messages from Thee.

Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee.

Frances Ridley Havergal 1863 – 1879

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 449

Lord of creation, to you be all praise!
Most mighty your working, most wondrous your ways!
Your glory and might are beyond us to tell,
and yet in the heart of the humble you dwell.

Lord of all wisdom, I give you my mind,
rich truth that surpasses my knowledge to find.
What eye has not seen and what ear has not heard
is taught by your Spirit and shines from your Word.

Lord of all power, I give you my will,
in joyful obedience your tasks to fulfil.
Your bondage is freedom, your service is song;
and, held in your keeping, my weakness is strong.

Lord of all bounty, I give you my heart;
I praise and adore you for all you impart;
your love to inspire me, your counsel to guide,

your presence to cheer me, whatever betide.

Lord of all being, I give you my all;

if I should disown you, I stumble and fall;
but, led in your service your word to obey,
I'll walk in your freedom to the end of the way.

Jack Copley Winslow 1882 - 1974

Closing words

The Lord our God grant you a spirit of thankfulness, and grace to serve him always. May his name be ever on your lips and in your heart. **Amen**

Prayers : Matt Stone – URC Handbook 2019; c Michael Townsend 1996

Readings : NRSV

Hymn : Compilation c 2011 Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes