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## Service for the Sunday after Ascension, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021

*A warm welcome to all who share in worship with us today.*

### CALL TO WORSHIP

You who are passing through hard times: come!

You who need strength to support those who are suffering: come!

You who are full of happiness: come!

You who are burdened and busy: come!

Come; let us unite in worship of the one who offers us protection, comfort and joy!

We come to you, Lord, ready to worship, ready to learn, ready for prayer, ready for action.  
May our worship here spill out into our every day lives. **Amen.**

HYMN: Forth in thy name

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1 Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go,  
my daily labour to pursue;  
thee, only thee, resolved to know,  
in all I think or speak or do.

2 The task thy wisdom hath assigned  
O let me cheerfully fulfil;  
in all my works thy presence find,  
and prove thy good and perfect will.

3 Thee may I set at my right hand,  
whose eyes my inmost substance see,  
and labour on at thy command,  
and offer all my works to thee.

4 Give me to bear thy easy yoke,  
and every moment watch and pray,  
and still to things eternal look,  
and hasten to thy glorious day;

5 For thee delightfully employ  
whate'er thy bounteous grace hath given,  
and run my course with even joy,  
and closely walk with thee to heaven.

*Charles Wesley*

SCRIPTURE READING Acts 1: 15-17, 24-26

<sup>15</sup> A few days later there was a meeting of the believers, about a hundred and twenty in all, and Peter stood up to speak. <sup>16</sup> "My fellow-believers," he said, "the scripture had to come true in which the Holy Spirit, speaking through David, made a prediction about Judas, who was the guide for those who arrested Jesus. <sup>17</sup> Judas was a member of our group, for he had been chosen to have a part in our work."

<sup>24</sup> Then they prayed, "Lord, you know the thoughts of everyone, so show us which of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to serve as an apostle in the place of Judas, who left to go to the place where he belongs." <sup>26</sup> Then they drew lots to choose between the two men, and the one chosen was Matthias, who was added to the group of eleven apostles.

## PRAYERS

*Let us pray*

Gracious God, set apart as your people yet together in your world,  
we worship you as one.

Emboldened by your power, protected by your promises and filled with your peace,  
we worship you as one.

Upheld by your word, inspired by your truth and named as your friends,  
we worship you as one.

Keep us safe in the world, keep us praying for the world, keep us serving the world as one,  
in Jesus' name.

**Amen.**

Gracious God, we thank you for the enduring prayer of Jesus for his disciples which reaches  
and reassures us today as we walk in their footsteps; reminding us that we are not alone but  
protected, empowered, forgiven, and surrounded by your grace every step of the way.

**Amen.**

Lord Jesus as your disciples in the world today, we thank you that your word of truth, your  
prayer of power and your heart of love, continue to protect, inspire and unite us as we live  
out our faith, build up our relationships and hold the world before you in prayer.

**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.**

## SCRIPTURE READING St John 17: 6-11

<sup>6</sup> "I have made you known to those you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you,  
and you gave them to me. They have obeyed your word, <sup>7</sup> and now they know that  
everything you gave me comes from you. <sup>8</sup> I gave them the message that you gave me, and  
they received it; they know that it is true that I came from you, and they believe that you  
sent me.

<sup>9</sup> "I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those you gave me, for they belong to  
you. <sup>10</sup> All I have is yours, and all you have is mine; and my glory is shown through them.

<sup>11</sup> And now I am coming to you; I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world. Holy  
Father! Keep them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they  
may be one just as you and I are one.

HYMN: Father, hear the prayer

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1 Father, hear the prayer we offer:  
not for ease that prayer shall be,  
but for strength that we may ever  
live our lives courageously.

2 Not for ever in green pastures  
do we ask our way to be;  
but the steep and rugged pathway  
may we tread rejoicingly.

3 Not for ever by still waters  
would we idly rest and stay;  
but would smite the living fountains  
from the rocks along our way.

4 Be our strength in hours of weakness,  
in our wanderings be our guide;  
through endeavour, failure, danger,  
Father, be thou at our side.

Lowe Maria Willis (and others)

COMMENTARY: *Mrs Pat Lomax*

### The potential of prayer

Today is Ascension Sunday and of course the most obvious reading is from Acts 1: 1-11 where Jesus says to his disciples, “when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. After saying this, he was taken up to heaven as they watched him, and a cloud hid him from their sight”. But this amazing text is the lectionary reading for Ascension Day which was this last Thursday, May 13<sup>th</sup>, so I have now been given perhaps a less familiar set of verses.

Less familiar or not, the two readings for today do seem to be more relevant at the moment. They don’t describe the ascension; instead, they deal with the implications of it. They show a church grappling with the what, why and how of communal life in Jesus’ bodily absence.

I love doing jigsaw puzzles. Can you imagine what it must be like if you have completed 2,999 pieces to a jigsaw and then find that there is one piece missing; or being a chess-lover and finding one piece is missing? My husband has taken me to several football matches, but I remember one particular game when Stockport County played at Bury. As the match was just about to start, in a rather louder voice than it should have been, I asked “why has Stockport only got nine players”? Dave replied quietly “Don’t be silly, there are eleven”. However, everyone around me started counting: there were only nine! Part of the team had been stuck in snow and didn’t arrive until half-time.

Perhaps these feelings are similar to how the disciples felt after Jesus’ return to heaven. Also, Judas was no longer with them and they were only eleven and so they chose Matthias to restore their number to twelve. Jesus chose twelve disciples from among a larger group of followers to symbolise one of the aims of his ministry.

The election of Matthias bridges past and present: the time of Jesus’ earthly life and that of the Church’s mission; the Old Israel, with its twelve tribes, and the New Israel, with its twelve leaders. By restoring the group of Jesus’ followers to twelve, Peter and the others

show that they have not lost sight of the breadth of this vision. There is a universal mission that they will start.

From our second reading we can see that Jesus was also clearly worried about his disciples before he left them. We have heard how Jesus prays for his friends and asks his Father to protect them in the uncertain times they face. The way in which Jesus prays helps us to understand the breadth and potential of prayer – not a formula of words, but an ongoing conversation and relationship with God that helps to inform and shape everything that we are and everything that we do.

Health and safety is a topic that can get people talking! At its best, health and safety legislation is there to enable us to identify potential risks and take sensible precautions; at worst, it can paralyse us and prevent us from doing anything. It is there as protection to help us face whatever dangers we may encounter during the course of our work and daily life. We have all been under strict Health and Safety regulations for the last fifteen months, and some of us may keep to the strict regulations for even longer.

In the same way, the protection we receive from God is not there to keep us out of danger and free from any difficulty or inconvenience we might encounter. It is there to help us face the world and all it throws at us. God's protection is there to assist us with doing the job we were called to do. God's protection of Jesus of Nazareth did not keep him from harm at the hands of the Romans and the religious leaders, but it did keep him safe to preach and to teach and to heal – and to die upon the cross and be raised to new life. There is something mysterious, yet reassuring, about this.

In Bob Dylan's song 'Like a Rolling Stone' there is a chorus:

How does it feel  
How does it feel  
To be on your own  
With no direction home  
Like a complete unknown  
Like a rolling stone?

The disciples are encouraged not to dwell on feelings of being abandoned, or on their own, but to find hope in the reassurance of Jesus' continuing presence, now that the work for which he was sent had been accomplished.

The concern was that Jesus knew he had been rejected in his suffering and death, so the world would reject the disciples. This is why he prayed for their protection in the world.

Jesus was a 'giver'. As the Father is a giver, so the Son imitates the Father in His giving. Jesus prayed this entire prayer with His imminent departure in mind. He realized that He would no longer remain in the world, but His disciples would. They therefore needed special prayer.

They needed prayer because the unique three years of discipleship during His earthly ministry would be over. They needed prayer because of the circumstances surrounding the departure of Jesus; His betrayal, arrest, trial, beatings, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

They needed prayer because Jesus would not be there in His bodily presence to help them. They needed prayer because of the necessary role of the Holy Spirit, both for the sending of the Spirit and their constant reliance upon Him.

We are now entrusted with being 'givers' and acknowledging the power of prayer for one another and for the world. We are here because we have been entrusted to carry on the universal mission. If we were taken from the world, the world would be in utter darkness and would perish; Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." So, *shine!*

Amen.

#### PRAYERS of intercession

*Let us pray*

I invite you to be still and imagine sitting on a bench with Jesus beside you. What would you like him to pray for you? What might he say to encourage you?

Now can you imagine sitting on a bench beside someone who is going through a difficult time? It might be someone you know. Please now pray with that person.

Dear Lord we pray for our fellowship and our local community. Dear Lord please be with Don, Paul, and Jo.

We pray for the people in India and Nepal and many other countries suffering from the pandemic...

- Pray for the Lord's healing, peace, and comfort to be with all those who are ill or who are grieving lost loved ones.
- Pray for the Lord to sustain hospitals and to provide sufficient supply of the necessary medicines, ventilators, and oxygen.
- Pray for those who continue to minister and have been greatly affected by the lockdowns and are living with meagre food and resources.

We pray for a solution that will bring peace to Israel and Palestine.

We do not ask for escape from hardships that we know are part of life in this world. Rather we ask: protect us from evil, make us one, and be with us through your Spirit.

Show us your truth and guide us as we go out in your name.

We thank you, Lord, for the vaccination programme and pray that it will be rolled out in all countries of the world.

We are filled with joy that we can now see more of our family and friends.

**Amen.**

HYMN: God is gone up on high

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1 God is gone up on high,  
with a triumphant noise;  
the clarions of the sky  
proclaim the angelic joys!

Refrain

*Join all on earth, rejoice and sing;  
glory ascribe to glory's king.*

2 God in the flesh below,  
for us he reigns above:  
let all the nations know  
our Jesus' conquering love! [Refrain]

3 All power to our great Lord  
is by the Father given;  
by angel hosts adored,  
he reigns supreme in heaven: [Refrain]

4 High on his holy seat  
he bears the righteous sway;  
his foes beneath his feet  
shall sink and die away: [Refrain]

5 till all the earth, renewed  
in righteousness divine,  
with all the hosts of God  
in one great chorus join. [Refrain]

*Charles Wesley*

## BLESSING

As we leave this place, Lord, may our prayers be just beginning.

May our worship, our time here, what we have learned and what we have discovered, lead us into action and lives full of worship, every hour of every day.

We ask in the name of Jesus, whose life was an offering of worship to you.

**Amen**