

Personal Service 23rd January.

Call to worship.

The eternal Word has become human flesh.
Still he comes to his own people
to find that all will not recognize him.
But to those who believe
he will give the power to become children of God.

Hymn. StF 328. H&P 239. MP 379. Jesus shall reign where'er the sun.

Let us pray:

Creator God, in love you form us; bring us together in one world.
Loving Lord, in grace you restore us, bring us together in one body.
Gracious Spirit, in wisdom you rebirth us, bring us together in one mind.

We are the body, called to unity in our diversity,
called to flourish in our interdependency,
called to witness in our shared ministry.

So, make us, your loving, gracious and wise instruments, we pray.
As we serve a world in need of love, grace and wisdom,
may all become loving, gracious and wise. (Stephen Best. URC Prayer handbook 2019)

We confess that we find it hard to live up to the standard of your cross.
In the busyness of our daily lives, we can forget those who don't know
love, warmth, or kindness, those who hunger and thirst and those who
are not treated with equality or are persecuted.
Forgive us Lord, disturb our complacency, and renew us to serve in your
name. Amen.

Readings: Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10. & Luke 4:14 – 21.

Hymn. StF 404. H&P 315. God's Spirit is in my heart.

Collect for the day.

Loving God,
through your Son you have called us to repent of our sin,
to believe the good news,
and to celebrate the coming of your kingdom.
Grant that we may hear the call to discipleship
and gladly proclaim the gospel to a waiting world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The word of God read, heard, interpreted, the basic intentions for human life, challenging to the point of provoking rage and creating a community of diversity can be found in the readings from Nehemiah and Luke. To be reminded time and again that the people of the time, lived by the divine word, ancient but ever new. In hearing and obeying it there is consequence.

Nehemiah records the beautiful story of the people of the regathered community of Israel listening as one to Ezra read the Torah. As the words of the text are explained, the people begin to weep, only to be told by Ezra that the day is Holy, a day for celebration and not for mourning, “for the joy of the Lord is your strength”. Ezra’s reading of the “Law of Moses” was a recognition of the power of the written word of God, a moment when the Spirit speaks through the words on the page (or the scroll) and in doing so touches and changes the human heart. The mourning and weeping turns to great rejoicing because they had understood the words that had been declared to them.

The word from Luke reminds us that the word of God can also bring rejection and rage as well as delight. Jesus goes to Galilee and is now at work. It is suggested that there is a positive and warm response to Jesus’ teaching, but it soon unravels in his hometown of Nazareth.

As Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth, the initial response of the hearers is amazement at the gracious words he speaks. However, when he interprets the text and explains that the promise of liberation is for the non-Jew as well as the Jew, he is met with hostility and threatened violence.

In the synagogue, when Jesus reads from Isaiah, the people may not understand that the quotation applies to Jesus himself and his ministry. The spirit is indeed upon Jesus and he is the one anointed to preach or “to bring the good news”.

Jesus, the word of God, to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering the sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

As I write this service, the two top news items are the lockdown parties held at Downing Street and whether Novak Djokovic should be allowed to remain in Australia and play in the tennis tournament. Both these

stories involve how 'a law or rule' has been interpreted or worse still, that the people involved may consider that their status means that they are above having to abide by the rules like everyone else who is not fortunate enough to be privileged!

But I want you to focus on the good news that these readings for today tell us. The news that, despite the people in the synagogue becoming angry at Jesus for what he was preaching to them, was the start of His ministry and work that would bring the good news of the kingdom of God for everyone. It also announces both the nature of Jesus' ministry and the character of the church that will follow from that ministry. Jesus' ministry is to bring the good news to the poor. To declare that the captives and the oppressed should go free. That this action results directly from the will of God showed that the kingdom of God is at hand. Luke repeatedly brings us stories of Jesus' inclusion of the outcasts. He also tells of recovery of sight to the blind, not just sight to the physically blind but sight to those who cannot, or refuse to, see what is right in front of their eyes. "The year of the Lord's favour", may refer to the jubilee year. If so what Luke points to is the claim that the gospel demands a certain attitude about possessions. Followers of Jesus will find that they are expected to share possessions with others.

Those who are included in the liberation of Jesus' ministry come from within and from outside Israel. It is not the talk of liberation that offends the people of Nazareth, but the awareness that liberation includes those outside their own circle.

Good news indeed, that the kingdom of God is open to all. Just as the Spirit moved the people of Israel listening to Ezra, and the Spirit was indeed with Jesus as he interpreted the words of Isaiah, to the people of Nazareth, so the Spirit works with us in our churches as we spread the good news in our communities.

In our local communities, as well as around the world, there is inequality and injustice. Where there is hunger, homelessness, and poverty, our work to take the good news into our local communities is needed as much today as it was at the start of Jesus' ministry. May the Spirit move us to give the good news of the kingdom of God to everyone in our communities. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession.

Gracious God, we thank you for our communities, in churches, local neighbourhoods, towns and cities and other countries across the world.

We pray for the leaders of our churches and other faiths, may they bring the Light and Spirit of God to all who want and need His blessing in their lives.

We pray for the leaders of our local communities and our national leaders. May their decision making be for the good of all for whom they serve and may they work to bring justice and equality across our land.

We pray for all who care for the sick in our communities. For those in hospitals, care homes and living amongst us in our local communities. We give thanks for the dedication of doctors and nursing staff in these difficult times.

We pray for all the young people and children in our communities. We pray for the teaching and support staff who work to keep children safe in positive learning environments.

We pray for those in our communities who have lost their way in life, those who are suffering from the affects of unemployment, homelessness, and the inability to live prosperous lives due to discrimination and inequality.

Gracious God, you gave the church to stand at the heart of human communities, to be hubs of spiritual and social activity committed to the flourishing of every neighbourhood. Help us to build our churches to be a blessing to the communities around them, identifying their needs and talents and harnessing their energies and celebrating their successes.

Gracious God, thank you as a Trinity of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for giving us a model of community, of mutual care and affirmation. May we on earth echo your life in Heaven. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer.

Hymn. StF 410. H&P 774. Lord your church on earth is seeking.

Lord Jesus Christ, we have heard your call to walk the Christian way, and have received your ministry of healing and reconciliation.

Now, send us on our pilgrim way. Give us strength to keep the faith, insight to know where you are leading, and love for all our travelling companions.