



Service for Personal or Private Use Sunday 24th May 2020

It was on 24th May 1738 that John Wesley felt his heart 'strangely warmed' with the glow of new life in Christ, no longer pinning his hopes on observing church practices or his ordination, but entirely on the fact that Christ had died for his sins and had saved him from 'the law of sin and death.' Soon after, he went to see his brother Charles, who had had a similar experience three days earlier, and together they sang the hymn that Charles had written.

It is the **hymn** *Where shall my wondering soul begin?* (H&P 706 StF 454 – sorry; it isn't in Mission Praise, but *And can it be?* MP 33 is a good substitute!)

Bible reading – 1st Peter 4 verses 12 - 14 and chapter 5 verses 6 - 11

The trials Peter's readers were facing were very different from those we face, or those we faced last year. Persecution and martyrdom were realities for them. Peter invites them to regard their troubles as sharing in Christ's sufferings, so that they may also share in his glory with great joy. (See also chapter 1 verse 8)

There is a call to humility rather than self-reliance, to "cast all your cares on him because he cares for you." The phrase matches Psalm 55 verse 22, but is also the answer to Peter's exasperated rebuke of Jesus in Mark 4 v38 – "Are we to perish, for all you care?" He knows the answer now! There is a grace that is sufficient for us, however weak we may feel. The lion may roar, but we can resist him, firm in faith and upheld by grace.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as I approach you now I do so very much aware that through the centuries others have called you by this title. I recall that among their ranks were those who experienced the sufferings Peter wrote about; there were saints of God whose example puts me to shame; there are those whose influence on me has been beyond measure, and who have helped me to grow in faith.

I come into your holy presence by your invitation and not because I am worthy. I fall so far short of your glory – I fall so far short even of the standards I set myself – that I can only plead, "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

In a time of frustrating restrictions and tragic suffering I bring to mind the wonder of it all, that your Son stepped into this messy world; he identified himself fully with people like us; he felt our sorrows and our sufferings; he bore our temptations yet was without sin or failure himself; he revealed your love for the world and taught the ways of your Kingdom; he submitted to betrayal, rejection and crucifixion out of pure and redeeming love for us. We have a high-priest who is able to sympathise with us in our weakness. There is One who is at the right hand of the Majesty on high who declares to us, "Your sins are forgiven."

In that newness of life, Heavenly Father, I worship you. With new eyes I look out into your world. With fresh appreciation I receive your gifts. With a warmed heart I listen to the word of life, the message of your grace. Humbly I ask, show me still more of the amazing love of Jesus for me.

I ask it in his name, Jesus Christ my Lord.

Amen.

Hymn *May the mind of Christ my Saviour* (H&P 739, StF 504, MP 463)

Bible reading – John 17 verses 1 to 11

This is the first part of what is often called “Jesus’s High-Priestly Prayer.” We eavesdrop on our Lord as he pours out his soul to the Father, anticipating his crucifixion even as he awaits his arrest. We tiptoe in, because we stand on holy ground. We cannot help feeling the poverty of our own prayers as we listen to his. We are humbled by the knowledge that he includes you and me in his prayer. Although the cross is less than twelve hours away, he cares about us (as Peter described it in our other reading).

Within so short a time he will be snatched from them. Even after his resurrection his presence with them – with *us* – will be different. He prays with that time in mind. The one who is our great High Priest “is able to save for all time those who draw near to God through him, since he lives for ever to pray for them.” (Hebrews 7 v25). How often have you known the encouragement, when facing some difficult situation, if a Christian friend says, “I’ll be praying for you.” How much more so when it is the Son of God who says, “I am praying for you!”

Do you think of prayer as just talking with God?

Or do you remember that Jesus is praying with you?

And if we know what he is asking for we shall know the sort of answers to look out for. When we are eventually allowed back into restaurants, we shall inspect the menu and make our choices. You know what you have asked for, and know what you will get. When Jesus asks the Father, he knows the blessing he intends for you. Let’s see what he is praying...

Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you (verse 1)

This doesn’t sound like a prayer for us, but it is the basis of the rest of the prayer. Jesus is returning to his Father’s presence (verse 5) where he will once again receive the worship he had always known. His *glory* is for him to be seen as he truly is, no longer confined to a human form with its limitations and frailty. The shabby clothes of our humanity are replaced by the dazzling robes of his divinity, God’s equal in rank and honour. In Revelation chapter 1 John sees Jesus in all his resurrection glory, and falls at his feet as though dead. He put that glory to one side when he entered this world, and shortly he will reclaim it. He will take ‘the highest station’ that the Father has granted to him (see Philippians 2 v 9 to 11). When we see his glory then we see the Father’s likeness and nature – just what Philip asked for in 14 v9 a fortnight ago.

Eternal life is to know him as he truly is, to trust him for all that he is. It is to enjoy so intimate a relationship with him that we also know the Father (verse 3).

The pathway he must take to reach that high place is via the cross. It is the only way. But it will not end there. From the shame of the cross, as he bears away the sin of the world, he will be raised in glory.

Do I regard Jesus with so much familiarity that I forget

his greatness and his holiness?

‘There thou art for sinners pleading, there thou dost our place prepare; ever for us interceding, till in glory we appear.’

I am praying for them (verse 9)

While the Son shares the glory of heaven, he prays for his followers on earth. He does not forget them. What a wonderful privilege that Jesus prays for us! Forgive the expression, but Jesus has not gone to Heaven to put his feet up and wait in leisure: he is still active on our behalf.

As you and I pray often and passionately for those closest to us (yes, we pray earnestly for many others too), so the Lord Jesus prays passionately for us. We were precious to him so precious that he endured the agonies of the cross to rescue and redeem us. He will certainly pray for us, that all he won at Calvary may not ‘go to waste’ now.

We may fail and stumble. “If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one,” wrote John in his first letter. I used to watch Perry Mason on TV, the American lawyer who never seemed to lose a case (I used to feel sorry for the Prosecutor

as week after week he prosecuted the wrong person). That was fiction; but our Advocate with the Father will genuinely never lose a case!

One of my teaching colleagues had a habit, if he needed to remember something: he would write it on the back of his hand. In Isaiah 49 verse 16 God says that he has written your name and mine on the palm of his hand. An old hymn has it: My name from the palm of his hand, eternity shall not erase; impressed on his heart it still stands, in marks of indelible grace.

The one who prays for us does so in perfect wisdom. He knows exactly what we need, and he prays that we shall receive it. Those things we need in order that we may follow Christ faithfully, they will be given. All we need to show ourselves true disciples, will surely come to us.

*What do you think that Jesus is praying **for you** right now?*

Keep them in your name (Verse 11)

To the Hebrew mind the 'name' was far more than a label to identify the person. It was in a very real sense a description of their character, or a wish for what the child might become. It was more like the nicknames that people acquire – sometimes cruelly accurate, and sometimes in genuine affection and respect. King 'Charles the Fat' of France and King 'Richard the Lionheart' are easy and opposite examples. The name of God was a way of saying "Keep my disciples by all the power and in all the love that are your nature as God." Archbishop William Temple describes it as 'watching over us with loving care.'

Jesus said that he had kept them in that name; now he prays that they may remain there. The boundary of safety is set – as long as we remain "in the name" and do not wander off beyond his love's limits, we shall be safe. As long as we honour that name, and endeavour to live to please him, we shall find the prayer of Jesus being answered. But we must not expect the answer if we place ourselves outside the perimeter. There is security within his loving care and his wise guidance.

That they may be one (verse 11)

Jesus prayed that his followers should be united, but he did not pray that they should be identical. A violin and a trumpet make very different sounds, but each contributes to a symphony. Provided each makes the sound the composer had in mind, they play their proper part. Christians are all unique; we each have our contribution to make to the symphony of God's glory. Don't be envious when another is playing the melody, or when their part is loud and yours is soft. Each part is important.

Or think of some complicated piece of machinery. Some parts are large and others small. Some are visible and others out of sight. But it is only when every part is working together, moving in harmony, that the machine operates correctly.

The church for which Jesus prayed needs its trumpets as well as its violins, its cogs as well as its pistons. Perhaps during these weeks of isolation we have begun to appreciate how much the fellowship – the being together in worship and prayer – really means. I keep hearing of phone calls and other signs of deep caring. That is "being one." I see my fellow Christians on 'Zoom' on Sunday as we join together in worship. That is "being one." Countless acts of service, or words of testimony, commend Christ to others. That is "being one." I join with other Christians in acts of witness or service or worship. That is "being one." We may not do the same thing, or do it the same way, but we are "one" as we offer it to God in cooperation and not in competition.

How will I express that unity when restrictions are lifted?

And although we are physically separated, the way in which so many from our churches use the Circuit's materials each week is strengthening our unity – and answering Jesus's prayer.

The Lord's Prayer is the prayer that unites Christians of every sort and every age.

Prayers of Intercession

Eternal God, you have given all authority in heaven and earth to your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Grant that we may never lose the vision of your kingdom but serve you with hope and joy; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Almighty God, I hold onto the truth that Jesus is praying *with me* and *for me*. I join my prayers with his as I remember the needs of others today, because he is praying for them as well as for me.

Many people in the Health Service are exposed to risk as they treat the sufferers from Covid, and I ask for their protection. I pray too for those who are infected, and for their anxious relatives. At the same time, I pray for other patients and other Health Service workers, dealing with other illnesses and emergencies.

The headlines focus on the Health Service; but other essential work continues. I pray for those in the food-supply chain; for transport workers; for teachers and other school staff; for Undertakers who are sadly so busy at present; for those who clear our rubbish, and those who keep our power and water supplies going. When so much of their vital work goes unnoticed, may it not go unappreciated.

I pray for young people, at various critical stages of their education and development. Some are at the very beginning, laying the foundations for all their learning and skills. Others are at important transitions, and uncertain about what will come next. Others were expecting to be taking major exams to earn vital qualifications. There are very young ones, who cannot grasp social distancing or why it matters. There are older ones, anxious about how their futures may be jeopardised. May each find the way through this time of crisis as a stronger and wiser person.

I pray for my friends of other Christian traditions, thanking you for those precious things we hold in common, and for those parts of the faith to which they draw my attention with a new appreciation. May our fellowship in Christ enrich and encourage us all, in that unity for which our Saviour prayed.

I offer my prayers, in unity with his, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Hymn *Alleluia, alleluia, give thanks to the risen Lord* (H&P 250, StF 295, MP 30) – even though the word should be Hallelujah, with a good expressive Hebrew ‘H’ and not an apologetic Greek ‘!’

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

and the love of God,

and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,

be with us all evermore. Amen.

Bible readings for next week – Pentecost Sunday

John 20 verses 19 – 23

Acts 2 verses 1 – 21

Psalms 104 verses 24 – 35

1st Corinthians 12 verses 3b – 13

You may also want to mark Ascension Day on Thursday 21st May, with

Acts 1 verses 1 – 11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1 verses 15 – 23; and Luke 24 verses 44 - 53