

WELCOME

Welcome to our service for the second Sunday of Lent. The Psalmist cries (*Psalm 22*) “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?*”² *My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.*³ *Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises.*⁴ *In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.*⁵ *To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.*⁹ *You brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast.*¹⁰ *From birth I was cast on you; from my mother’s womb you have been my God.*¹¹ *Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help”...*²⁴ *He has not despised or disdained the afflicted one...but has listened to his cry for help.*²⁷ *All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord and will bow down before Him.*

The Psalmist knew and experienced God’s Presence very close to him in his life but also times when he felt totally abandoned by God. Jesus knows what that is like – the first words of the Psalm are heard from Jesus’ lips on the cross. Abandoned by God in a way none of us can imagine what it must have been like for Jesus – the One who had always been bound intimately and lovingly to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit., now out of God’s Presence, totally alone as He took on my sin, your sin, the sin of the world. We know the next part of the story but Lent should be a time where we take time to ponder the immensity of God’s love for us bringing Him our worship and adoration for through Jesus’ death we have the possibility of God’s eternal Presence with us day by day. As the Psalmist knew and wrote about, there are times when we find it difficult to know God’s Presence in our lives but as we remember His love and goodness and the fact that He was willing to go through the time when the relationship of God Father, Son and Spirit was fractured only to be reunited, we too can know that in the past God has been with us, in the present even if we find it difficult to recognise His Presence we know we in faith that He will be with us again in the future and so we come to praise Him, the King of Heaven.

HYMN 160 Praise my soul the King of Heaven

Praise my soul the King of heaven to His feet thy tribute bring
Ransomed healed restored forgiven who like me His praise should sing
Praise him praise Him Praise Him praise Him Praise the everlasting King

Praise Him for His grace and favour to our fathers in distress
Praise him still the same for ever slow to chide and swift to bless
Praise Him praise Him praise Him praise Him glorious in His faithfulness

Father like He tends and spares us, well our feeble frame He know
In his hands He gently bears us rescues us from all our foes

Praise Him praise Him praise Him praise Him widely as His mercy flows

Frail as summer's flower we flourish blows the wind and it is gone

But while mortals rise and perish God endures unchanging on

Praise Him praise Him praise Him praise Him praise the high eternal One

Angels help us to adore Him ye behold Him face to face

Sun and moon bow down before Him dwellers all in time and space

Praise Him praise Him Praise Him praise Him Praise with us the God of grace

Henry Francis Lyte (1793–1847) from *Psalm 103* Reproduced from *CH4 CD-ROM edition, number 160* .

PRAYER OF ADORATION AND CONFESSION

Merciful God we worship you today; the one who reached out to your world through Jesus welcoming those whom society has rejected and the world considered unacceptable.

You have time for us just as we are – **Lord we praise you.**

You called Matthew the tax collector, you ate tea at Zacchaeus' house, you touched lepers and showed mercy to the woman caught in adultery. Time and again Lord Jesus you broke the mould offering us, through your faithfulness forgiveness and new life.

You have time for us just as we are. **Lord we praise you**

Today Lord Jesus you forgive rather than condemn, you build up rather than pull down, you encourage rather than criticise, you draw near rather than keep your distance, just as you did all those many years ago. You have time for us just as we are **Lord we praise you.**

Father God we rejoice that you accept us today, not for any actions on our part but simply by your grace. You value us despite our many weaknesses and our repeated faults. Your nature is always to have mercy; your grace is inexhaustible. **Lord we praise you.** Though you have time for us just as we are, you long to change us into the people we were designed to be and so we invite you to show us where we go wrong in order that we might come in sorrow, seeking your forgiveness. As a token of our willingness to be guided in your ways once more we give you our money, our time and our talents. Thank you that you take us and them in order to bring glory to yourself. In Jesus' name we pray saying together the prayer that he taught, 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 Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom the power and the glory forever. Amen

READING *Mark 8:31-38*

Read by Anne Bethune

³¹ Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: "The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law. He will be put to death, but three days later he will rise to life." ³² He made this very clear to them. So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke

him. ³³ But Jesus turned around, looked at his disciples, and rebuked Peter. “Get away from me, Satan,” he said. “Your thoughts don’t come from God but from human nature!” ³⁴ Then Jesus called the crowd and his disciples to him. “If any of you want to come with me,” he told them, “you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me. ³⁵ For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for me and for the gospel, you will save it. ³⁶ Do you gain anything if you win the whole world but lose your life? Of course not! ³⁷ There is nothing you can give to regain your life. ³⁸ If you are ashamed of me and of my teaching in this godless and wicked day, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

REFLECTION The Heart of the Matter – the biased heart.

I wonder how often we **don’t** have conversations with those we love about death and dying?

Specifically, our own death and dying. How often we avoid them at all costs? And yet death affects us all. Perhaps in this past year its effects have been brought to our attention in closer ways as we see the toll from Covid, from non Covid illnesses and from people’s selfish actions across the world. Indeed a few weeks ago a leaflet popped in to our letter boxes reminding us that the law for donating our organs is changing and reminding us of the need to speak to those we love about our thoughts on death and dying. Certainly Peter didn’t want anything to do with the Jesus who was saying he would suffer and die – that wasn’t part of Peter’s plan or what he thought God’s plan might be. It’s not fair might have been his cry – we assumed that God would send a Saviour who would take the world by storm, sweeping away his enemies and installing his special people in His Kingdom.

We are told that God’s ways are not our ways though and that should make us stop and think about what we think of God’s plan for our individual lives, our churches lives, our world’s life are and how that might differ from what His plan really is for us.

“It’s not fair!” We’ve all cried that at some point in our lives I’d guess, usually when we’ve been told we can’t do something or maybe even we’ve been made to do something that we haven’t wanted to or maybe someone else has got to do something that we haven’t been allowed to or maybe when we’ve seen someone suffer and die. It begs the question though – what is fair and how can we be sure that we’ve got fairness right?

There needs to be a standard by which we gauge all thoughts and actions and Christians of course believe that God has set that standard. But I want to suggest to you this morning that God actually is NOT FAIR in his actions towards people. Strike me off as a minister now! I believe that God has a biased heart and that He calls His followers to have biased hearts too.

What is it the Psalmist says in *Psalm 22 v 24 – God does not neglect the poor or ignore the suffering; he does not turn away from them but answers when they call for help.*

God is the God who detested, (strong word) the sacrifices that the people of Israel made to him at various altars – why – because they didn't look after the poor – without justice and compassion, sacrifice is worth nothing. Micah poses the question, “*What does the Lord require? – to do what is just, to show constant love and to live in humble fellowship with God.*”(6:8)

Jonah complained bitterly to God that He wasn't going to be fair that's why he ran in the opposite direction from Nineveh. And also why he went into one of the greatest huffs of the Bible when he wanted to die after God had spared the Ninevites because of the message of forgiveness that Jonah had brought to them and they had reacted positively to. (Chapter 4)

Jesus when he came to show us God's way of doing things was always to be found with the outcasts of society, with the poor and needy, with those who had no voice of their own. The religious leaders of the day would cry, “It's not fair,” Why would he spend time touching the leper, healing on the Sabbath, acknowledging the faith of the Samaritan woman, and the woman too who begged for crumbs from under the table?! Jesus who's mission statement was taken from the prophet Isaiah – “*I come to bring good news to the POOR to set the CAPTIVES free, to bring sight to the BLIND, to set free the OPPRESSED*” (Isaiah 61:1-2). “It's not fair,” they cried and Jesus cried that too along with them but then went on to help them.

Mercy, a great Christian word, a great Christian virtue which by its very nature is not fair! When Queen Victoria came to the throne one of the first things she was requested to sign was the death warrant for a convicted criminal. She and she alone had the power to send him to his death. When she asked if she had any choice in the matter she was told that she could invoke the royal pardon. She did, saying that she wanted to send a message to her subjects about the way in which she would rule her land. So often mercy brings out the best in those who have received it. Those of you who are Les Miserable fans know the difference the bishop's treatment of Jean Val Jean made to his life.

Mercy is not fair. It is compassionate, forgiving, loving. Think of Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son – that wasn't fair – and that's what the big brother cried. And yet that is the story that shows us how God, as our Father, acts towards us his children.

When Peter asked Jesus about how many times people had to be forgiven the answer was seventy times seven – in other words always. That's not fair – we want our pound of flesh, we want justice. God wants love and mercy.

The biased heart of God led him to allow His Son to die on the cross so that we, his children, might know of his love, his mercy, his forgiveness. That wasn't fair! Jesus led an exemplary life – and yet the biased heart of the Son meant that He was willing to be tortured to death so that we might have life.

This is the first time in Mark's gospel that we read of Jesus telling his friends, the disciples, that suffering and death - his suffering and death was a necessary though unfair part of God's plan for the world; the plan which would enable God's people to come back into His presence to live in safety, security, wholeness and peace. As we put our trust in Jesus' death on the cross, we are given the opportunity to have our lives transformed by God's Spirit in our lives helping us, forgiving us, challenging us, guiding us into a new life where we cry, "It's not fair," when we see the unfairness in the world. But we mustn't stop there.

God cries, "It's not fair," when we as his children ignore the poor, the outcast, the oppressed of our society, when we stick to feathering our own nests at the expense of others. Fairtrade Fortnight, which is on just now, is a way of learning how we can help those who cannot help themselves. Fighting for trade laws that do not discriminate, so that the Third World countries remain in poverty while the rest of us become richer.

God calls us, His people, to stand up for what is right – to get ourselves immersed in actions that will help the poor, the outcast and the oppressed of our world, of our society. His call is to us his people as individuals and also to us as his church. He calls us to be aware of others around us in our towns, our valleys, our communities, our nation and our world.

Our focus should never be inwards only, being outward looking is essential too. We also need to be aware of the power that God has given us to enable us to lobby the Government on behalf of those who have no voice. The Church of Scotland is encouraging us as individuals to contact our MP in order to share our concern, our displeasure even, that the international aid budget is to be cut. The Church of Scotland had for many years supported the target of a minimum spend of 0.7% of gross national income on overseas development. If enough Conservative MP's disapprove of the cut, with the support of other parties the 0.7% spending target could be maintained. Why not contact your local MP John Lamont to let him know your concern.

Jesus calls his followers to take up the cross and follow him – many disciples left after he said that – it was too hard a message. The lectionary reading for last week was the one where Jesus was tempted in the desert. That was all about the temptation to misuse the power that He had from God.

Jesus' way calls us to be honest about the power we have -- both the worldly power we've got because of our skin colour, our gender, our social class, our education, and the spiritual power we have as a community upon which God has breathed the Spirit -- and then to let all of that influence our lives so that we may help those in need-- ***"let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24)*** -- to empower the poor, to meet the outcast and the oppressed of our society where they are and bring them the message in word and in deed that God is a God who is not fair but is one who offers love, forgiveness and mercy to all.

Helder Camara a South American bishop says this, "Be careful of the way you live, it is the only gospel most people will ever read!"

God is the God of the biased heart. He calls us to follow in His footsteps.

Our second hymn reminds us that God is the God of love who lives on His throne and where Jesus pleads our cause and the cause of the world. Before the throne of God above.

HYMN 466 Before the throne of God above

Before the throne of God above, I have a strong a perfect plea
A great High Priest whose name is Love who ever lives and pleads for me
My name is graven on His hands my name is written on His heart
I know while in heav'n He stands No tongue can bid me thence depart
No tongue can bid me thence depart

When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there who made an end to all my sin
Because the sinless Saviour died my sinful soul is counted free
For God the Just is satisfied To look on Him and pardon me
To look on Him and pardon me

Behold Him there! The Risen Lamb, my perfect spotless righteousness
The great unchangeable I AM the King of glory and of grace
One with Himself I cannot die my soul is purchased with His blood
My life is hid with Christ on high with Christ my Saviour and my God
With Christ my Saviour and my God

Charitie L. De Chenez (1841–1923) Reproduced from CH4 CD-ROM edition, number 466

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

Alison Blackadder

Lord God, as we approach and look forward to this new Spring season, we thank you that you have been with us thro'out the dark days of winter, and the even darker days of this pandemic. Whilst so many have struggled, let us be glad that you have shared our anguish and offer us the hope that we all need at this time.

As the new shoots of life are beginning to appear, we pray that this renewed hope will carry us forward so that we can continue to share the Good News that your love and care will continue to be with us.

At this time of year, the arrival of new lambs and calves may soon begin to lift our spirits.

Let us be grateful for the farmers who, perhaps themselves, have had a difficult year, but still have the will to continue with the arduous work that it so often takes.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for our Keyworkers in their various occupations, and especially for the NHS who have worked tirelessly thro'out this past year. Give them the strength to continue to provide the

care and support to those in need; the sick, the dying, and the vulnerable. And let us pray too, that all the delays in medical treatments will soon be allowed to commence.

We bring to you those involved in scientific research who are trying to eliminate this dreadful virus, and to those who are delivering and administering the vaccinations as speedily as they can.

For our Teachers and Educators and for the children who may have suffered with their own mental health and well-being, and for the parents who are home-schooling, and trying to juggle that with working from home as well, may they know that You are with them in their struggles.

We pray for our World Leaders and Politicians in these unprecedented times. Give them the courage and strength to continue with their promises. And as our thoughts also turn to the troubles and Peoples in the World today, let Your enduring love be ever present in their lives.

We give thanks for our Church and our Church Family who have sustained us. Let us appreciate that we have been able to carry on your work thro the power of the internet, and prayer. Our Communities too, deserve our praises. Their support and encouragement has been gratefully received .

Finally, Lord God, we bring to You our families and friends, for whom many of us have not seen physically for some time. Let us be thankful that You have been with us to bear the loneliness and sadness, and to give us hope that we may soon be meeting together again.

The new Spring shoots that are beginning to appear are once again giving us renewed hope, and we give thanks to You for this gift of life.

Amen

Introduction to 3rd hymn

“God’s not fair,” I said in my sermon – I hope you’ve listened this far because I’d like to say God is fair – fair to all. His bias towards the poor is because of His people’s, our, inability to act fairly. We need God’s challenge to change our ways Let us think of that as we remind ourselves that God is the God of the poor, the God of all

HYMN Beauty for Brokenness

(words omitted for copyright reasons)

BENEDICTION

Go from here walking the Way of Christ, sharing the Messiah’s good news, prepared to take up your crosses, and to be God’s people. Go to serve, to live in love, and to act with grace knowing the blessing of the Presence of Almighty God working in your life and through your life today and everyday Amen.