

North Staffordshire Circuit (11/22)

**Service Sheets
For the Month of
February 2024**

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Sunday 4th February 2024 – Ordinary 5

This service has been compiled by Rev'd Joy Ventom

Call to Worship:

How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. 'So, let us praise the God who is great in strength and mighty in power, and whose love will never let us go.

Hymn: As We Are Gathered

As we are gathered, Jesus is here;
one with each other, Jesus is here.
Joined by the Spirit, washed in the blood,
part of the body, the church of God.
As we are gathered, Jesus is here,
one with each other, Jesus is here.

Prayers:

God of all, we praise you for your care, commitment and compassion for all life. Your energy never runs out. Your well of love never runs dry. Your grace never goes stale. Your word is always alive and fresh and lifegiving. Thank you, God, our strength. Thank you, Jesus, our Saviour. Thank you, Holy Spirit, our Comforter.

God of compassion and peace, forgive us when we don't hear the cries of your children: forgive us when we don't hear the silence of the oppressed: forgive us when we don't hear the words of challenge: forgive us when we don't hear our own words of hypocrisy: That we may serve you with all our hearts and minds and souls – in Jesus' name.

Lord of our highs and our lows: when we are sorry, you forgive us; when we are weary, you refresh us; when we are jaded, you encourage us; when we feel forgotten, you reach out and remind us of your ever-present and eternal love. And so we trust you for today, believe in you for tomorrow and will praise you for all eternity – in Jesus' name. 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. Forever and ever. Amen

Hymn: Lord Jesus Christ (StF 594)

Lord Jesus Christ
You have come to us
You are one with us,
Mary's Son.
Cleansing our souls from all their sin.
Pouring Your love and goodness in.
Jesus our love for you we sing,
Living Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ
Now and every day
Teach us how to pray,
Son of God.
You have commanded us to do
This in remembrance Lord of you
Into our lives your power breaks through,
Living Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ
You have come to us
Born as one with us,
Mary's Son.
Led out to die on Calvary,
Risen from death to set us free,
Living Lord Jesus help us see
You are Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ
I would come to you
Live my life for you,
Son of God.
All your commands I know are true,
Your many gifts will make me new,
Into my life your power breaks through,
Living Lord.

Bible Reading, Isaiah 40:21-31

²¹ Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

²² It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to live in,

²³ who brings princes to naught and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

²⁴ Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

²⁵ To whom, then, will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"?

²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted,

³¹ but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Sermon:

The opening images in today's reading from Isaiah are majestic. God is the one who stretches out the heavens, brings down earthly rulers like stubble in a tempest, creates and numbers the host of stars. They are images of power, but they can make God seem very distant from our everyday lives. If God 'sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers' (Isaiah 40.22) that can make us feel of no more importance than insects. If that was all the passage said about God, then the exiles might well feel abandoned in Babylon – that 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God' (verse 27).

But the passage moves on to assure them otherwise. It concludes: 'those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles' (verse 31), an image of humanity soaring to God. That promised renewal of strength is the sign that God, far from viewing humanity as mere grasshoppers, actually enters into the heart of individuals to give the inner strength to endure. The mighty power, described at the beginning of the reading, is not distant from us, but is ours to draw on in the minutiae of our daily lives.

'Have you not known? Have you not heard?' is repeated like a refrain, giving it a special emphasis (verses 21 and 28). The two questions can appear to be saying the same thing, but 'know' and 'hear' are not identical.

'Have you not heard?' implies that people have shared their experiences. For us to hear of God's power, someone must tell us. Perhaps people have told you personally of the effects God has had in their lives, the evidence they have had that God 'gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless' (verse 29). Perhaps you have read accounts, or listened to people speaking on programmes such as BBC's Songs of Praise.

However, all this is second hand. ‘Have you not known?’ asks a rather different question. It asks what we have experienced for ourselves of God’s power in our lives. Sometimes we have to take the long view to discern it. The Babylonian exile lasted about 60 years and, looking back, the exiles may well have asked themselves how they got through it. Today’s passage originates from a period in their exile when the end was in sight, perhaps a time when they could reflect on the faithfulness of the God who had strengthened them for the experience and now offered the hope of mounting on eagles’ wings. Perhaps it gives us the opportunity to reflect on our own lives to consider where God has renewed our strength when we felt faint, weary and powerless, or even fell, exhausted on our journey. And if we have stories to tell, then ‘Have you not heard?’ can encourage us to tell them, because unless we do, others will not hear of God’s power in ordinary lives.

Hymn: What a Friend We Have In Jesus (StF 531)

What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
take it to the Lord in prayer!
Can we find a friend so faithful
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
take it to the Lord in prayer!

Are we weak and heavy laden,
cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge--
take it to the Lord in prayer!
Do your friends despise, forsake you?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he'll take and shield you;
you will find a solace there.

Intercessions:

God of love, you give power to the faint and strength to the powerless. Many of us are exhausted, juggling with school at the kitchen table, responding to demands of work or family life or dealing with isolation, joblessness and fear.

We pray for the leaders of our church ... Encourage and strengthen them in their work, give us all fresh vision for the future of church and renew our imagination, creativity and wisdom as we address financial and ministerial challenges. Turn us towards each other in acts of loving service, then turn us outwards to carry your gospel of healing into the world.

Renew our strength and bind up our wounds. Help us to hope in you.

God of love, you call worlds into being; you number the stars and call us all by name. You created a world of plenty and beauty, of magnificence and diversity. We pray for faithful climate leadership here and across the world. We ask for bold and brave decision-making that recognises the crisis we are in – decision making that challenges our dependence on fossil fuel, that works to restore decades of damage from greed and exploitation. God of all creation, you restore the face of the earth: stir us up to action to protect our planet. May our feet tread lightly on the earth and our actions and priorities bring healing to our battered world.

Renew our strength and bind up our wounds. Help us to hope in you.

God of love, you restore what is broken and you bring together what has been split apart. We ask for peace in dangerous and fragile situations, in places where streets are filled with fear. Although our leaders may often fail us, may we trust again that there is a world of possibility where the mistakes of the past can shape a better future.

Renew our strength and bind up our wounds. Help us to hope in you.

God of love, you defend the voiceless. We pray for the UK where society is marred by vast inequalities of life chances, opportunities and money, the vast wealth owned by some and the struggles of others just to make ends meet. Today we pray for people living in places that are unsuitable, perhaps cold, unsafe or covered in mould, who are afraid to sleep at night. We ask for a just settlement of this crisis and commitment from government to ensure this is never repeated. Help us to be alert to the pain of others. May we hear the cries of the powerless and by our words, choices and actions may we be agents of healing in the world.

Renew our strength and bind up our wounds. Help us to hope in you.

God of love, we pray for the renewal of our cities so that in them people can live, work, play and find space to breathe. We ask that priorities would work for people rather than speculative investment; for the common good rather than corporations. We pray for the social cohesion of our neighbourhoods and are aware of lost networks of support and care. We pray for charities struggling and as we look to the future, may we work to build connection rather than separation and restore the fabric of community.

Renew our strength and bind up our wounds. Help us to hope in you.

God of love, you heal the broken hearted and you gather in all who are lost. We pray for all who are mourning the loss of family members or friends. We offer to you all who are suffering in mind or body ... asking for peace, and for your healing presence in their need. Send your blessing on all who are afraid or alone or hungry, on those whose lives are being destroyed by abuse or violence, and on all for whom home is not a safe place.

Renew our strength and bind up our wounds. Help us to hope in you.

God of love, your kindness is everlasting. Surround us with your arms of love; keep our eyes fixed on you and make us ready to follow where you lead, trusting that you will provide for us – today and always. Amen.

Hymn: Lord Of All Hopefulness (StF 526)

Lord of all hopefulness,

Lord of all joy,

Whose trust, ever childlike, no cares could destroy,

Be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,

Your bliss in our hearts, Lord,

At the break of the day.

Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,

Whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,

Be there at our labours and give us, we pray,

Your strength in our hearts, Lord,

At the noon of the day.

Lord of all kindness, Lord of all grace,

Your hands swift to welcome, Your arms to embrace.

Be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,

Your love in our hearts, Lord,

At the eve of the day.

Lord of all gentleness,

Lord of all calm,

Whose voice is contentment,

whose presence is balm,

Be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,

Your peace in our hearts, Lord,

At the end of the day.

Blessing:

Lord builds up his people; (one hand on the other) he gathers the outcasts. (make a gathering gesture) He heals the broken-hearted, (hands on heart) and binds up their wounds. (grip biceps) The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; (raise hands) thanks be to God. Amen.

Sunday 11th January 2024 – Transfiguration

This service has been compiled by Rev'd Liz Singleton.

Rise and shine!
Darkness flees from the earth.
Light dawns.
The King is coming!
The God of all creation calls us to worship.
Church bells ring out.
Birds sing.
Rise and shine!
Sunlight, crisp air, rain, frost and snow declare:
The King is coming!
Green shoots burst through frozen earth.
Crocuses, golden and royal purple, carpet the way.
Rise and shine and give God the glory.
The king is coming here today!

Hymn: Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies (StF 134)

Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
Christ, the true, the only Light,
Sun of Righteousness, arise,
triumph o'er the shades of night;
Day-spring from on high, be near;
Day-star in my heart appear.

Dark and cheerless is the morn
unaccompanied by thee:
joyless is the day's return,
till thy mercy's beams I see,
till they inward light impart,
glad my eyes, and warm my heart.

Visit then this soul of mine;
pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
fill me, radiancy divine;
scatter all my unbelief;
more and more thyself display,
shining to the perfect day.

Prayer:

Gracious God, your glory fills the universe:
we see it in the sun, moon and stars.
Your glory is all around us:
we see it in majestic trees, delicate flowers, tumbling streams and cascading waterfalls.
Your glory is in us, created in your image.
Gracious God - **we praise you.**
Gracious God, your glory was seen in Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lived among us and loved us to the end.
Your glory is seen in those who follow Jesus,
loving as he loved, caring as he cared.
Gracious God – **we praise you.**

Gracious God, your glory was seen in the Holy Spirit,
brooding over the waters of chaos, sweeping down in tongues of flame.
Your glory is seen in those filled by the Spirit,
inspiring us, challenging us, enabling us.
Gracious God – **we praise you.**

Amen

In this reading from Psalm 50 the writers want to get our attention by telling us that God is speaking. He describes how God is shining out across all creation and is summoning us into a relationship with him. The encouragement is to listen to God's word but to be prepared to bear the consequences when we don't.

OT Reading: Psalm 50:1–6 NLT

The LORD, the Mighty One, is God,
and he has spoken;
he has summoned all humanity
from where the sun rises to where it sets.
From Mount Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God shines in glorious radiance.
Our God approaches,
and he is not silent.
Fire devours everything in his way,
and a great storm rages around him.
He calls on the heavens above and earth below
to witness the judgment of his people.
“Bring my faithful people to me—
those who made a covenant with me by giving sacrifices.”
Then let the heavens proclaim his justice,
for God himself will be the judge.

Our next hymn comes from the section of the hymnbook entitled *The Promised Christ: Advent*. Not a hymn you might expect to sing in the middle of February! However, the words reflect the message of the reading we will share shortly – the story of the Transfiguration. Henry Burton (writer of ‘There’s a light upon the mountains’) describes the glory and the beauty of God revealed in Jesus but also draws our attention to Jesus’ messianic mission that will involve rejection, suffering, death and resurrection and a call to us all to share in that journey.

Hymn: There’s A Light Upon The Mountains (StF 188)

There's a light upon the mountains, and the day is at the spring,
when our eyes shall see the beauty and the glory of the King;
weary was our heart with waiting, and the night-watch seemed so long;
but his triumph-day is breaking, and we hail it with a song.

There's a hush of expectation, and a quiet in the air;
and the breath of God is moving in the fervent breath of prayer;
for the suffering, dying Jesus is the Christ upon the throne,
and the travail of our spirit is the travail of his own.

He is breaking down the barriers, he is casting up the way;
he is calling for his angels to build up the gates of day:
but his angels here are human, not the shining hosts above;
for the drum-beats of his army are the heart-beats of our love.

Hark! We hear the distant music, and it comes with fuller swell;
'tis the triumph-song of Jesus, of our King, Immanuel:
Zion, go now forth to meet him; and, my soul be swift to bring
all your finest and your noblest for the triumph of our King!

Our New Testament reading comes six days after Jesus has taught his disciples about his mission. Now three of his disciples are given a glimpse of his past and future glory. The word used here to describe the complete change that comes over Jesus is the word from which we get metamorphosis.

NT Reading: Mark 9:2–9 NLT

The Transfiguration

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed, and his clothes became dazzling white, far whiter than any earthly bleach could ever make them. Then Elijah and Moses appeared and began talking with Jesus.

Peter exclaimed, "Rabbi, it's wonderful for us to be here! Let's make three shelters as memorials — one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He said this because he didn't really know what else to say, for they were all terrified.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to him." Suddenly, when they looked around, Moses and Elijah were gone, and they saw only Jesus with them.

As they went back down the mountain, he told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Reflection:



Stained glass windows are transformed when they are lit up. The sun shining through this window shows colours and patterns that we might not have seen before. In those words from Mark's gospel we heard how three of Jesus' disciples show him 'lit up' and how it helped them to see him in a new light; in a way that they hadn't seen him before.

Imagine what it was like on that morning, climbing a steep, rocky mountain path with Jesus leading the way and Peter, James and John struggling to keep up behind him. Everyone is panting a bit. Now and again someone has to stop because a sharp piece of stone has caught in their sandal. Lizards are basking on the rocks, enjoying the sunshine. The breeze is blowing gently through the grass creating a sort of musical swishing sound.

Finally they reach the top and the view is amazing. Villages and lakes looking like perfect little models below them. It's like being at the highest reaches of the earth and this is where Jesus has come to pray. Throughout the gospels we read of times when Jesus has done just this - taken himself away to spend time with God. Sometimes to a lakeside or a garden or a hillside but always because he knows that he needs that space to be quiet and to be able to hear what God is saying.

Then suddenly, Peter, James and John realise that Jesus is looking different. He seems to be shining – Mark describes it as 'dazzling. Imagine how, if you look towards the sun, you have to screw your eyes up but the light is too bright to be looked at comfortably. That's what it was like on the mountain top that day and the disciples realise that this is something amazing. It's like looking at the very presence of God himself. And as their eyes adjust they notice that Jesus is no longer alone. Two other people are talking with him and it's as if all three are in a radiant and holy space between earth and heaven. Jesus' companions recognise these two people to be Moses and Elijah and just as they're getting their heads around the enormity of what's happening a cloud casts a shadow over them and they hear a voice which they somehow know is God. 'This is my beloved Son: listen to him.'

And almost in an instant the disciples look up again and there is Jesus, on his own, looking quite normal. But they will never be the same again! In that brief moment Peter, James and John saw Jesus for who he really is and, as more and more experiences reveal more of his nature to them, so they are transformed. The light of Jesus' glory acts almost like a mirror. As his followers look more closely at him the more clearly they see themselves as they really are, becoming aware of their own imperfections. And in doing so they realise how they need to change and why. And so it is with each of us when we are in the presence of Jesus. He enables us to see ourselves as God intends for us to be and he helps us to make that transformation.

But not only does the light of Jesus' glory help us to see ourselves but it also helps us to see the world through God's eyes. That moment on the hillside came to an end but Jesus continued, and still continues, to illuminate the world through his teaching, his sharing, his healing, and his forgiveness. Lent begins on Wednesday (14th). How, I wonder might you, might we, focus on his words during Lent? How might we listen

to him and spend time with him recharging our spiritual batteries? How might the light of God's glory revealed in Jesus shine through our transformed lives to help transform the bit of the world that is around us?

On the way back down the mountain Jesus tells Peter, James and John not to say anything about what they have seen until after he has risen from the dead. They have no idea what he is talking about but we know what happened. Over the coming weeks we will again travel with Jesus to Jerusalem but then on Easter morning we will celebrate as Jesus is glorified. And this despite the dark sadness of the cross because even there Jesus has been shining with love for us all.

Hymn: Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise (StF 55)

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might -
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life thou givest, to both great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on a tree,
and wither and perish; but naught changeth thee.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
all praise we would render: O help us to see
'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

'Transfiguration'

From that one moment, in and out of time,
On that one mountain where all moments meet,
The daily veil that covers the sublime
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.
There were no angels full of eyes and wings,
Just living glory full of truth and grace.
The love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face.
And to that light the light in us leaped up,
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.
Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar,
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.

Prayers:

Dazzling God, we have seen your glory:
the glory of Moses that is the glory of your righteousness;
the glory of Elijah that is the glory of your holiness;
the glory of Jesus that is the glory of your love.

Dazzling God, we have seen your glory;
and we pray that it may fill the world.
Shine the glory of your righteousness in the dark places
where there is injustice, poverty or hatred.

Dazzling God, we have seen your glory;
and we pray that it may fill your church.
Shine the glory of your holiness in the dark places
where there is disunity, persecution or despair.

Dazzling God, we have seen your glory;
and we pray that it may fill our lives.
Shine the glory of your love in the dark places
where there is illness, sorrow or fear.
A space to pray for those things on your heart and mind today.

Dazzling God, we have seen your glory
and we pray for the time
when your glory shall fill the earth.
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: O Thou Who Camest From Above (StF 564)

O thou who camest from above
the pure celestial fire to impart,
kindle a flame of sacred love
on the mean altar of my heart.

There let it for thy glory burn
with inextinguishable blaze,
and trembling to its source return,
in humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
to work, and speak, and think for thee;
still let me guard the holy fire,
and still stir up thy gift in me -

Ready for all thy perfect will,
my acts of faith and love repeat,
till death thy endless mercies seal,
and make the sacrifice complete.

Blessing:

Lord God,
you chose to reveal your glory to me
through the life and death of your Son, Jesus.
Help me to live my life in the light of that glory.
Lord, let my life reflect you in everything I do.
Amen.

Over the coming days why not see how many words you can make from the letters

TRANSFIGURATION

Sunday 18th January 2024 – Lent 1

This service has been compiled by Rev'd Christine Legge

Call to Worship:

Rainbows delight and surprise us.
Our breath pausing, we stand under the beauty
of the creator's promise of unfailing love.
Colours of joy beaming onto us,
recalling us to remember, to turn,
to believe the good news.

Hymn: The Splendour of the King (StF 15)

The splendour of a King
Clothed in Majesty
Let all the earth rejoice
All the earth rejoice
He wraps Himself in light
And darkness tries to hide
And trembles at His voice
Trembles at His voice

*How great is our God, Sing with me,
how great is our God, and all will see how great
how great is our God*

And Age to age, He stands
And time is in His hands
Beginning and the end
Beginning and the end
The Godhead, three in one
Father, Spirit, Son
The Lion and the Lamb
Lion and the Lamb

Chorus

Songwriters: Chris Tomlin, Ed Cash, Jesse Reeves. For non-commercial use only.

A Prayer of Adoration:

God of truth,
we praise you for your covenant with us and all creation and
for all the colours of your blessings:
for the reds and yellows of your unconditional and costly love;
for the pinks and greens of your creativity and compassion;
for the oranges and purples of your grace and understanding;
and for the blue of your faithfulness.
In wonder and joy we praise you. **Amen.**

A Prayer of Confession and an Assurance of Forgiveness

A Prayer of Confession:

Response after each phrase:

Forgive us and help us to make a fresh start.

God of all,
when we abuse your covenant with us and are complacent:
when we trash your creation ruthlessly and selfishly:
when we reject your call to live well and generously:

when we take your love for granted:
In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

Assurance of Forgiveness:

Faithful God, you raise us up from the ashes of sin and repentance to the joy of forgiveness and acceptance; you flood our hearts with your love, your grace and your beauty; you give us the opportunity to make a fresh start and to seek out that which is lifegiving and creative and fulfilling; you journey with us through the storms and the failures and equip us to stand firm and to flourish. Thank you. **Amen.**

Introduction to the Reading:

Today we hear from Genesis, the first of Israel's books of the Law, which tell of the covenants that bind God and his people together. After the great flood, Noah and his family set out on God's new beginning for humanity, under a covenant promising God's new blessing on all creation.

Genesis 9: 8 – 17

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ⁹ "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

¹² And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³ I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. ¹⁶ Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."

¹⁷ So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth."

Thanks be to God for His Word

Hymn: O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go (StF 636)

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee.
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

O Light that follows all my way,
I yield my flick'ring torch to thee.
My heart restores its borrow ray,
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that sleekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee.
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee.
I lay in dust, life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red,
Life that shall endless be.

Reflection:

Noah's ark captures people's imagination as a great escape story.

Having created the world God became very disappointed with the mess human beings made of their appointed task of helping God care for creation. Things were so bad that '...the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart' (Genesis 6:6). So, God has another attempt to form a new creation. This time God uses a tried and tested honourable human, Noah, and two of each type of animal to start again. And we all know the rest of the story. Two of every form of animal get shut up in the ark.

But the ending of the story is amazing, and we often miss this while we are caught up in the drama of the rescue. As the flood subsides, God's love for humans and indeed the whole of God's creation deepens. God's heart is moved – permanently changed. God sees the frailty of humans and compassionately accepts humans as they are in their wonderfulness and messiness all mixed up together. God pledges to love not only humans, but the whole of creation in an unending and steadfast love that will wrap around each person, each family, each tribe, each creature and the whole world, no matter what for ever and ever.

God pledges God's love, as it were, in human sickness and in human health, in human flourishing and in human poverty for ever and ever and ever. The promise goes beyond the death of Noah's generation to include Noah's descendants and on to us and our descendants. And because it is God's, the promise is utterly reliable.

Take

a moment

to

b r e a t h e **d e e p l y**

and to feel the reassurance that this promised love gives you:

a love that will be with you,

all those you love

and all of us through thick and thin.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this promise is that it is

Unconditional.

It is almost as if God knows we are not up to reciprocating the promise. Some days we might be up to it a bit, and other days completely miss it. But God guarantees to pick up the slack when we miss the mark. The beauty of this promise is reflected in the beauty of the rainbow – a radiant cosmic smile holding together in its image light, warmth and water – essential elements to sustain the life of the universe.

Hymn: All My Hope on God is Founded (StF455)

All my hope on God is founded;

he doth still my trust renew.

Me through change and chance he guideth,

only good and only true.

God unknown,

he alone

calls my heart to be his own.

Human pride and earthly glory,

sword and crown betray his trust;

what with care and toil he buildeth,

tower and temple, fall to dust.

But God's power,

hour by hour,

is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom, passing thought:
splendour, light, and life attend him,
beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore
from his store
new-born worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty giver
Bounteous gifts on us bestow;
His desire our soul delighteth
Pleasure leads us where we go,
Love doth stand
At his hand;
Joy doth wait on his command.

Still from earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call
one and all:
ye who follow shall not fall.

Prayers of Intercession:

We pray for those exploring faith,
for those preparing for baptism,
and for those around the world
who are persecuted for their religion:
may they know the good news of the kingdom.

We pray for the world that God loves so much,
and for those who have the power
to bring peace to the nations:
may they work with truth and integrity.

We pray for our community and those who are in need,
for the fragile and the vulnerable,
and for those who support and care for them:
may they feel the presence of Jesus walking with them.

We pray for those who are homeless,
for those who are unemployed,
and for those who will go hungry and thirsty today:
may we, in Christ, draw near to bring comfort and support.

We pray for ourselves,
for strength to commit ourselves to follow in your way, Lord,
and the grace to withstand temptation:
may we grow closer to you as we journey through Lent
and prepare to meet Jesus at the cross.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: Love Divine, All Loves Excelling (StF 503)

Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down;
Fix in us thy humble dwelling;
All thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
Pure unbounded love Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation;
Enter every trembling heart.

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit,
Into every troubled breast!
Let us all in Thee inherit;
Let us find the promised rest.
Take away the love of sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, as its Beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.

Come, Almighty to deliver,
Let us all Thy grace receive;
Suddenly return and never,
Never more Thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve Thee as Thy hosts above,
Pray and praise Thee without ceasing,
Glory in Thy perfect love.

Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

A Sending Out Prayer:

God of new beginnings,
your undying, tender love is truly amazing.
You sustain the whole universe with what is needed for life.
You trust us humans to care for that life.
We often fail,
but your love reaches out a hand to pick us up,
to help us start again.
Thank you. **Amen.**

Blessing:

May the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit
be with you now and with all those whom you love and cherish,
in this world and the next, for evermore. **Amen.**

Sunday 25th January 2024 – Lent 2

This service has been compiled by Rev'd Mrs Sheila Heap

**Wherever you are, welcome to this time of worship.
May you find it to be a time of blessing.**

Call to Worship:

Faithful God, as we continue our journey of Lent,
we come together as part of Your family, Your church, Your people,
to worship and to learn from You.

None of us are too young or too old to follow You.

All of us can be surprised by new opportunities, new challenges, new ways to serve You.

We are known by name and cherished as Your children,

whatever our age, whatever our circumstances, for You call and love us all. **Amen.**

Hymn: At the Name of Jesus (StF 317)

At the name of Jesus
Every knee shall bow,
Every tongue confess Him
King of Glory now.
'Tis the Father's pleasure
We should call Him Lord,
Who from the beginning
Was the mighty Word.

Humbled for a season.
To receive a name
From the lips of sinners
Unto whom He came,
Faithfully He bore it
Spotless to the last,
Brought it back victorious
When from death He passed.

Bore it up triumphant
With its human light,
Through all ranks of creatures
To the central height.
To the throne of Godhead,
To the Father's breast,
Filled it with the glory
Of that perfect rest.

In your hearts enthrone Him,
There let Him subdue
All that is not holy,
All that is not true;
Crown Him as your captain
In temptation's hour;
Let His will enfold you
In its light and power.

For this same Lord Jesus
Shall return again,
With His Father's glory,
With His angel train;
All the wreaths of empire
Meet upon His brow,

And our hearts confess Him
King of Glory now.

Caroline Maria Noel (1817 – 1877)

Prayers of Praise and Confession:

Mysterious God, You love and hold the universe in being.

You treasure each of us as a work of art, a sign of Your presence.

When we haven't a clue what You are doing, help us to trust You,
knowing that You see the whole picture.

Faithful God, as we continue our journey of Lent,

we come together as Your family, Your church, Your people, to worship and to learn from You.

None of us are too young or too old to follow You.

All of us can be surprised by new opportunities, new challenges, new ways to serve You.

We are known by name and cherished as Your children, whatever our age, whatever our circumstances,
for You call and love us all.

God of our days and nights, we are sorry for those moments when we see obstacles and You see stepping
stones:

Forgive us and help us to change our perspective.

We are sorry when we just see the years behind us, and You see the years ahead:

Forgive us and help us to change our perspective.

We are sorry for the times we put limits on what we feel is possible, and lose sight of the fact that You are the
God of the impossible:

Forgive us and help us to change our perspective.

We are sorry when we shrink the world to our size and lose sight of the vastness of Your compassion:

Forgive us and help us to change our perspective.

In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

You may like to join in The Lord's Prayer here ... Our Father, who art in heaven ... Amen.

Psalm 22:23–31

'You who fear the Lord, praise Him!

All you descendants of Jacob, honour Him!

Revere Him, all you descendants of Israel!

For He has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one;

He has not hidden His face from him but has listened to his cry for help.

From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;

Before those who fear You will I fulfil my vows.

The poor will eat and be satisfied;

Those who seek the Lord will praise Him –

May your hearts live for ever!

All the ends of the earth will remember and return to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down
before Him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and He rules over the nations.

All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;

All who go down to the dust will kneel before Him –

Those who cannot keep themselves alive.

Posterity will serve Him; future generations will be told about the Lord.

They will proclaim His righteousness to a people yet unborn – for He has done it.' (NIV)

Introduction:

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus refers to Himself as the 'Son of Man', meaning son of Adam, or, in modern
language, a human. Peter has just declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the long-looked-for God-anointed spiritual
leader whose purpose is to restore Israel's fortunes. Jesus offers a challenging commitment – not just to the
disciples but to all those who would follow Him.

Gospel Reading: Mark 8:31-38

‘He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the Law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” He said. “You do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men.”

Then He called the crowd to Him along with His disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny Himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save His life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Hymn: Come With Me, Come Wander (StF 462)

Come with me, come wander, come welcome the world
Where strangers might smile or where stones may be hurled;
Come leave what you cling to, lay down what you clutch
And find, with hands empty, that hearts can hold much.

*Refrain: Sing hey for the carpenter leaving His tools!
Sing hey for the Pharisees leaving their rules!
Sing hey for the fishermen leaving their nets!
Sing hey for the people who leave their regrets!*

Come walk in My company, come sleep by My side,
Come savour a lifestyle with nothing to hide;
Come sit at My table and eat with My friends,
Discovering that love which the world never ends.

Refrain:

Come share in My laughter, come close to My fears,
Come find yourself washed with the kiss of my tears;
Come stand close at hand while I suffer and die
And find in three days how I never will lie.

Refrain:

Come leave your possessions, come share out your treasure,
Come give and receive without method or measure;
Come lose every bond that’s resisting the Spirit,
Enabling the earth to be yours to inherit.

Refrain:

John L. Bell (b. 1949) & Graham Maule (b. 1958)

Reflection:

An affluent businessman stood at the end of the pier of a small fishing village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the boat were several large, yellow fin tuna. The businessman complimented him on the quality of his fish and asked how long it had taken to catch them. The fisherman replied that it hadn’t taken long.

The business man then asked: “But what do you do with the rest of your time?” The fisherman replied: “I sleep a little, fish a little, play with my children, talk with my wife, stroll into the village each evening for a glass of wine and play on my guitar. I have a full and busy life.” The businessman scoffed! “I am a successful businessman – you should follow my advice. You should spend more time fishing. With the proceeds, buy a bigger boat, then you would catch more fish and buy more boats until you own your own fleet. Instead of selling your fish to local fishmongers, you could sell straight to processors. Eventually, you could own your own cannery! You would control the product, processing and distribution. You would have to leave the village and move to the city, and eventually, the capital from where you could run your expanding empire. “ “The fisherman asked: “But how long would all this take?” The reply was: “Fifteen to twenty years.” “But what

then?” asked the fisherman. The businessman laughed. “That’s the best part. You could sell your company and stock to the public and become rich. You would make millions.” “Millions. What then?”

“Then you could retire to a small fishing village where you could sleep late, fish a little, play with the grandkids, talk to your wife, stroll into the village each evening, have a glass of wine and play your guitar!”

I wonder if you’re asking: “Surely there had got to be more to life than this?” It really is ironic that a lifetime of hard work merely rewarded him with what he already had! It would be like the little hamster running round and round in the wheel in his cage, going faster and faster and going nowhere!

The reality is – there is: Our Gospel reading tells us that there is. Jesus offers a invitation to follow Him. Life following Jesus is nothing like running on a treadmill going nowhere.

I wonder if you ever feel that that is the mindset that we live in today? Getting so caught up in the culture of materialism is the culture that Jesus challenges. If we think about many of the challenging, serious issues facing us in the world today, where do you think the roots lie? How much is derived from concentrating on wanting more, bigger and better rather than on pondering what people can give and contribute to the good of others? Too stressed out – like the businessman or laid back – like the fisherman?

I wonder if that is why so many people cannot accept the concept of self-denial, living to share the Gospel with others – turning our backs on the culture of the day and living a life of commitment to Jesus? That is His challenge to the disciples, the listening crowd and to us. It’s not about living an unfulfilling, unadventurous life: it’s about stepping off the wheel and living in a different way.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t ask us to take up His Cross – He asks us to take up *our* cross. He doesn’t call us because we are ‘qualified’: it’s because we aren’t. He calls us *because* of our weaknesses, our failures from the past, our human experiences. He wants us just as we are. He is calling us to leave behind trying to live in our own strength and to show us a better way of reaching our potential – and that can be very exciting and adventurous.

Jesus had shared with His disciples what was ahead for Him. He sensed the Cross lay ahead. He knew that it was a reality. In Jesus, God came into the human situation in all its faults and darkness. God came to take the situation into His own hands. The Cross demonstrated God’s willingness to live in the footsteps of humanity. Jesus took up the Cross and in the resurrection, made a bridge between humankind and Himself. It is in Christ’s Cross that we discover we are part of God’s eternal plan. It is in our willingness to live with all our human experience, putting our faith in the God who created us, that we discover life – in the fulness Jesus offers – in enabling Him to live in us and continue to work through us.

On the surface, the challenge of Jesus can appear harsh and impossible to follow – that’s a common complaint against Christianity that it’s too difficult. But Jesus puts it into a more meaningful prospective. He invites us to follow Him in the *way* of the Cross: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” [vs. 35 & 36]

That brings us back to the fisherman. I don’t know if he took the businessman’s advice – but I can hazard a guess. He could have spent his life chasing dreams – only to burn himself out, running round a treadmill. And for what? The way of living that Jesus challenges us to follow – taking with us everything that we are – will lead us to cross that bridge that He has built for us to live in God’s presence, power and promise – with no treadmills!

Prayer of Commitment:

Lord Jesus Christ, we struggle to come to terms with Your way,
For it cuts across the norms and expectations of this world.

We resist the idea of surrendering all,
Of losing our life in order to find it.

Like Peter, confronted by the stark reality of the Cross,

We find ourselves asking:

Isn’t there a less costly, less demanding path?

Teach us the values of Your Kingdom,

Where the last are first and the least greatest.

Teach us the meaning of love –

Above all, of Your love that fills the universe,

Changing lives and transforming history.

Help us, then, for all our doubts and lack of understanding,
To celebrate what You have done,
And obediently to walk Your way. **Amen.**

Hymn: [Sung to 'Winchester New' StF 265 – 'Ride on, ride on in majesty']

Take up your cross, the Saviour said,
if you would my disciple be;
deny yourself, the world forsake,
and humbly follow after me.

Take up your cross, let not its weight
fill your weak spirit with alarm;
His strength shall bear your spirit up,
and brace your heart and nerve your arm.

Take up your cross, nor heed the shame,
nor let your foolish pride rebel;
your Lord for you the cross endured,
to save your soul from death and hell.

Take up your cross then in His strength,
and calmly sin's wild deluge brave,
'twill guide you to a better home,
it points to glory o'er the grave.

Take up your cross and follow Christ,
nor think till death to lay it down;
for only those who bear the cross
may hope to wear the glorious crown.

To You, great Lord, the One in Three,
all praise forevermore ascend:
O grant us in our home to see
the heavenly life that knows no end.

Written by Charles W. Everett in 1883

Prayers of Love and Concern:

Let us remember all those who are followers of Jesus Christ. In the pauses at the end of each prayer, please remember those people and situations known to you that you would like to share with God today:

For those who are imprisoned for their faith,
for those who serve as missionaries,
for teachers of the faith...

We pray for those who deny themselves to serve others;
for those who work in hospitals and prisons,
for those who are carers,
for those who serve their communities as volunteers...

We pray for those who carry the weight of a cross;
for the homeless and unemployed,
for those who are ill or bereaved,
for those who struggle with mental health...

We pray for ourselves, as we follow Christ;
for strength to overcome our struggles and failures,
for our fears and worries,
for those we love, and those who love us...

Amen.

Hymn: Will You Come and Follow Me (StF 673)

Will you come and follow me
If I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
And never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
Will you let my Name be known,
Will you let My life be grown in you
And you in Me?

Will you leave Yourself behind
If I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind
And never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
Should your life attract or scare?
Will let me answer prayer
In you and you in Me?

Will you let the blinded see
If I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside
And never be the same?
Will use the faith you've found
To reshape the world around,
Through My sight and touch and sound
In you and you in Me?

Lord, Your summons echoes true
When You but call my name.
Let me turn and follow You
And never be the same.
In Your company I'll go
Where Your love and footsteps show,
Thus I'll move and live and grow
In You and You in me.

John L. Bell (b. 1949) & Graham Maule (b. 1958)

Blessing:

Thank you that You are with us in times of joy and sorrow.
Thank You that You are with us in difficult times, when we are confused and don't understand.
May we feel Your presence – at all times and in all places.
May we discern Your guidance and learn to trust You,
confident that Your blessing, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are with us always. **Amen.**

Our printed services do not include an offering but if you feel you would like to respond to God's love in this way please contact the treasurer of your church or contact the Circuit Office. Thank you.

If you no longer wish to receive this printed sheet, could you let either your Minister or the Circuit Office (tel: 01782 612648 e-mail: northstaffscircuit@hotmail.co.uk) know please, or equally, please let us know if there's someone you know who would like to receive it.