

East Durham Methodist Circuit:

Online Service for 9th May 2021

Prepared by Alison McLeod and Ann Riding

Reader (Video Service): Ian Murray

Theme: God's Amazing Love

Call to worship: based on Psalm 98

The Lord has done wonderful things; let us sing a new song with our lips, our lives, our hearts, our very being.

Sing a new song to the Lord.

Amen

Hymn: Ten Thousand Reasons

Matt Redman

StF 823

Bless The Lord, O my soul

O my soul

Worship his holy name

Sing like never before

O my soul

I'll worship your holy name

1. The sun comes up
It's a new day dawning
It's time to sing your song again
Whatever may pass
And whatever lies before me
Let me be singing
When the evening comes

Bless The Lord, O my soul...

2. You're rich in love
And you're slow to anger
Your name is great
And your heart is kind
For all your goodness
I will keep on singing
Ten thousand reasons
For my heart to find

Bless The Lord, O my soul...

3. And on that day
When my strength is failing
The end draws near
And my time has come
Still my soul will
Sing Your praise unending
Ten thousand years
And then forevermore.

Bless The Lord, O my soul...

Prayers of Praise and adoration: (based on Nick Fawcett) by Ann Riding

Gracious God...

We praise You for the great gift of love
Love, that we are able to share with those around us
That gives us a sense of self - worth and belonging
And that enriches our life in so many ways

We praise You that You are above all else, a God of Love.

Not of judgement, anger, or vengeance
But of a love that goes on reaching out to us day after day
Flowing out to us like a never- ending stream

Though we fail You again and again
Caring more about ourselves, than You or others
Still You go on loving us, fiercely and wholeheartedly.

Though we turn away from You wilfully rejecting Your guidance and repeatedly
betraying Your trust. Still You long to take us back, to restore a living, loving relationship

Speak to us through all You have done and so deepen our love for You and for others.
You have opened your heart to all. Help us to do the same

Gracious God...

Help us to know that Your love flows through us
Reaching upwards in worship, inwards in fellowship and outwards in service to the glory
of your name.

You have opened your heart to all. Help us to do the same.

In the name of Christ

Amen

Readings:

New Revised Standard Version

1 John 5: 1-5 Faith Conquers the World

¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.

And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴ for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵ Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

John 15: 9-17

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you.

¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Hymn: Here is love, vast as the ocean

John Andrew Schreiner / Robert Lowry / William Rees

1. Here is love, vast as the ocean,
Loving-kindness as the flood,
When the Prince of Life, our Ransom,
Shed for us His precious blood.
Who His love will not remember?
Who can cease to sing His praise?
He can never be forgotten,
Throughout heaven's eternal days.

2. On the mount of crucifixion,
Fountains opened deep and wide;
Through the floodgates of God's mercy
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
Poured incessant from above,
And heaven's peace and perfect justice
Kissed a guilty world in love.

Message:

Two readings. One from the gospel of John; the other from the epistle of John. And although the epistle is anonymous, its style and vocabulary indicate that it is written by the same author as the gospel – the Apostle John. What do we know about him?

John writes much of the New Testament and his words are full of insights into his character and personality. We can see how he views Jesus through his Gospel writings: his epistles give us his teachings and advice to the early church having lived and learned from Jesus. In his book of Revelation there are even glimpses of the future which were given to him by God.

There is no doubt that John played a major role in the early church – and is still playing that part today as we read and study his writings.

As the younger brother of James he was also a frequent companion to Peter, the three being the closest disciples to Christ. In fact, Jesus named John and his brother the sons of thunder because they were so passionate, zealous and ambitious.

John outlived all of the rest of the disciples. And although his writings hint that he still possessed a fiery spirit, old age and his experiences with and of Jesus tempered that spirit. It was tempered by LOVE. A quality he learned directly from that perfect example – Christ himself!

John had been a bold and ambitious young man – famously wanting a seat next to Jesus in God's kingdom; forbidding a man to cast out demons in Christ's name because he wasn't one of the twelve, the inner circle, the elite group! Jesus had rebuked him for his arrogance and we see that Jesus' teaching on love, obedience and humility DID pay off.

The author, John MacArthur, says that John aged well – he mellowed. He also says that love did not nullify John's passion for the truth, rather, it gave him balance. He retained to the end of his life a deep and abiding love of God's truth – and he remained bold in proclaiming it!

We have read earlier some of his powerful words.

In the Gospel we hear some of the last words of Jesus to his disciples, his final instructions as it were, on how to go on after his imminent death.

Famous words: **'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends'**

And never was a statement so true. Wonderfully true. Jesus spoke these words knowing that his time on earth was coming to an end. He knew what He would soon face, that He was on his way to his own execution and that fact, that act of sacrifice, still is for us the most amazing example of the very point: **'There is no greater love than this!'**

Jesus words throughout this passage are borne out of friendship and love. Not romantic love, Jesus' emphasis here is to love **as an action**. And love cannot be contained - should not be contained - Jesus didn't contain His love for anyone in all the bible stories of his life and ministry and he did not make the ultimate sacrifice just for his close friends and disciples, **He made it for ALL of us**. He gives us, as He so often does, the perfect example to follow. We should not just contain our love and devotion to Christ - we should act out that love and share it: **'love one another as I have loved you'**.

I suppose that begs the question – how do we know if we do? What is the measure of our love? And the answer is not a comfortable or easy one, because he lays down his life for us!

Such love for us, such obedience to His father! I'm reminded of two things – the beautiful and poignant line in the hymn we shall hear and sing after this message: 'Behold the man upon the cross, my sin upon his shoulders – it was MY sin that held him there! His dying breath has brought me life.'

And those lines always bring to mind Salvador Dali's painting entitled **Christ of Saint John of the Cross**. Dali paints the crucifixion from above Calvary, looking down on Christ from above the cross (as God would have watched the crucifixion) and there is no blood, no crown of thorns and crucially, no nails.

We do not see the 'usual' depiction of Christ on the cross with the horror it entails. Instead, we see a perfect being, but the poignancy truly is in the fact that nothing is keeping him on the cross except, as the hymnwriter says, 'my sin that held him there'. Once again - we see love, we see love in action as he laid down his own life, doing everything he could do, for his friends – for us! And all he asks is that we love one another as he has done.

So the measure of our Love? Showing Love! Reflecting Jesus in our lives. Being obedient to God. Bringing others to share in life, faith and the love of God.

And it is in the epistle that John shows us how our faith, love and obedience to God are related to each other. Faith brings us into that loving relationship with Him; love for God leads us to love others and to be obedient to Gods commands. He states that living by the rules should not be a burden to us! Its proof that we love Him... but it doesn't mean it's easy.

Christian love can be very difficult: it's not easy to love and forgive someone we don't like very much, who have hurt us or our family. But our response to God must be love - in fact it is a command! **Because** we are loved by God, Jesus was sent to show us how things should be done, to give us advice, rules and guidance - and obedience to them is an opportunity to show our love in return.

Thankfully, we are not alone in this. We have the Holy Spirit to help and guide us. And our faith gives us a strength and shield to cope with all the things the world throws at us – especially over the past year.

Because we know too well that this wonderful world can also bring its own pressures and trials, we can sometimes be overwhelmed by the things we see which are so

wrong, which hurt us and others, which harm the environment. Those difficult personal relationships which test our patience or challenge our faith and belief. We sometimes wonder how we can carry on with what the world throws our way.

Yet the same world, William Barclay states, did its worst to Jesus. It hounded Him and slandered Him. It branded Him heretic and a friend of sinners. It judged Him, crucified Him and buried Him. It did everything it possibly could to eliminate Him - and it failed.

It failed because Jesus was the Messiah. It failed because men like John learned truth from Him and as it developed in his heart over all those years following Jesus' death and resurrection, he was able to understand all that Jesus really was saying to him in those early years.

And he shared those experiences and taught throughout the early church in his letters and in his own ministry, spreading the word we are still reading and living our lives by today. The teachings and example of Christ – a man who loved someone like John, with his faults and failings and transformed him from a son of thunder to the disciple of love.

John learned to love as Jesus had and it is the focus of his writings, particularly those we heard today.

Can we show that love? Can we show that love by putting aside any prejudices and fears we may have? Can we show that love by bringing others to share in the life and love of God? Can our actions, words and prayers and money make a loving difference? Can we live a life of love in action? A life of obedience and commitment to God?

Tough questions!

I would now like to share a reflection by Nick Fawcett:

"I actually believed I was offering total commitment.

When I knelt in prayer, sang your praises and studied your word it was an act of worship and an expression of adoration. When I brought my gifts, offered my service and shared my faith, it was in grateful response, a declaration of love. I called it devotion and believed it to be just that – my life consecrated to you – and it was Love, so far as it went!

But the love I offered involved just a small part of my life, a prescribed area set aside for you - spiritual, sacrosanct - with the rest of my life lived my way; by my rules, for my ends.

Forgive me, Lord, I don't mean to shut you out; it's simply that I seldom think to let you in; but that's the problem: offering a little of self, so easy: offering all, so hard.

Yet that's what you did – you gave everything in Christ, your only Son, offered freely, gladly, without restraint, your love poured out for so many.
I don't get near to that Lord, so, by his grace, touch my heart and teach me to love you as you love me."

And that is our prayer, isn't it? And it's very difficult and something to ponder and pray about. But I close with the words of two rarely used verses of the hymn which we sang before the sermon and I think they direct us where to start!

Let me, all Thy love accepting,
Love Thee, ever all my days;
Let me seek Thy kingdom only,
And my life be to Thy praise;
Thou alone shalt be my glory,
Nothing in the world I see;
Thou hast cleansed and sanctified me,
Thou Thyself hast set me free.

In Thy truth Thou dost direct me
By Thy Spirit through Thy Word;
And Thy grace my need is meeting,
As I trust in Thee, my Lord.
Of Thy fullness Thou art pouring
Thy great love and power on me,
Without measure, full and boundless,
Drawing out my heart to Thee.

Amen

Hymn: How deep the Father's Love for us Stuart Townend StF 780

1. How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure!
That He should give His only Son,
To make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss!
The Father turns His face away;
As wounds which marred the Chosen
One
Bring many sons to glory.

3. I will not boast in anything:
No gifts, no power, no wisdom;
But I will boast in Jesus Christ:
His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer;
But this I know with all my heart:
His wounds have paid my ransom.

2. Behold the man upon a cross:
My sin upon His shoulders;
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life:
I know that it is finished.

Prayers of Intercession: Ann Riding

We now come to our prayers of Intercession :

God of Love **Hear our prayers**

God of love, friend to those in power.

We are reminded, as we had the elections in our country this week, of the privilege we have in being able engage in democracy and vote.

Whatever our political leanings we pray for those who now hold seats in our areas. May they be diligent in working for the communities they serve, be passionate about improving the lives of others and open to listening to views different from their own. Equip all of our representatives with the gifts of thoughtfulness, grace and integrity

God of love, friend to those in pain.

We look at the situations that have unfolded in our world.

We continue to feel despair for those who are ill and dying and for those who are grieving for loved ones, especially in India.

We pray for the urgent supplies they need to arrive quickly and safely.

We also think among many other disasters, of the Mexican people, as they come to terms with the railway collapse and the loss of life and injuries that ensued.

Please bring signs of improvement and hope.

God of love, friend of those who are tired.

Even though we are moving out of crisis mode there are those who remain exhausted.

Help those in the NHS and key workers who are weary and tired, to find rest and renewed enthusiasm for their work.

Also many members of our communities are left with covid symptoms and are struggling with daily life. We ask for insightful research into the after effects of coronavirus and ways to help all return to normality.

God of love, friend of the struggling.

As we see lockdown lessening and we try to return to normal we think of all who have lost their jobs, face financial hardship and have problems with life in general. We ask for resilience in the face of such difficult times and perseverance as they seek new work and try to cope with the demands of everyday life.

God of love, friend of our friends.

Thank you for the gifts of love and friendship. For people who bring fun and joy into our lives and for the warmth friends bring. Thank you that we can once again meet those we love. Bless all those who have helped us over the past months, laughed with us and cried with us even if a distance away. Bless our friends and help us to look to Jesus to learn how to deepen our friendships and live his life of love **Amen**

We now say together the Lords' Prayer (this version is by Peter M Parr)

Our Father

Perfect Love

We turn again to you

Guide us, help us to love, so that your will be done on earth as in heaven

Give us this day that which we need

Fill us with hope and trust

Help us to forgive our brothers and sisters (and ourselves as well)

And to look on them as you look on us

Give us strength to resist temptation

When we are tempted let us choose peace

Deliver us from our fears

For what and who you love are safe

And your love remains for ever and always

Amen

Hymn:

Lord I come to You

Geoff Bullock

StF 471

1. Lord I come to You
Let my heart be changed, renewed
Flowing from the grace
That I have found in You
And Lord I have come to know
The weaknesses I see in me
Will be stripped away
By the power of Your love

**Hold me close
Let Your love surround me
Bring me near
Draw me to Your side
And as I wait
I will rise up like the eagle
And I will soar with You
Your Spirit leads me on
In the power of Your love**

2. Lord unveil my eyes
Let me see You face to face
The knowledge of Your love
As You live in me
And Lord renew my mind
As Your will unfolds in my life
In living every day
By the power of Your love

Hold me close...

Blessing:

Lord Jesus, we rejoice that You have chosen us to be your friends. Help us to be a friend to You by obeying Your commands.

As we go out into Your world, help us to live a life that reflects Your love by being a friend to each other.

Amen