

**East Durham Methodist Circuit:**

**Service 3<sup>rd</sup> April**

**Prepared by Rev Alf Waite**

**Theme: Dying we live.**

**Call to Worship:**

Dear Jesus, who was lifted up to draw us to yourself, and who suffered and died so that we might live, we gather to honour and thank you, to offer our lives to you in worship and to open ourselves to your life-giving Spirit again. Work in our hearts and lives today, we pray that we may become a people who carry your life into every corner of our world. **Amen**

**Hymn: To God be the Glory Fanny Crosby StF: 94 / H&P: 463**

1. To God be the glory, great things he hath done!  
So loved he the world that he gave us his Son,  
who yielded his life an atonement for sin,  
and opened the life gate that all may go in.

**Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,  
let the earth hear his voice!  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,  
let the people rejoice!  
O come to the Father thru Jesus the Son,  
and give him the glory, great things he hath done!**

2. O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,  
to every believer the promise of God;  
the vilest offender who truly believes,  
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

**Praise the Lord...**

3. Great things he hath taught us, great things he hath done,  
and great our rejoicing thru Jesus the Son;  
but purer, and higher, and greater will be  
our wonder, our transport, when Jesus we see.

**Praise the Lord...**

**Prayer of Adoration:**

Lord, I lift up my heart to you in love and adoration, and praise you for your greatness. You are the great and mighty King and all glory belongs to you. Words cannot describe how awesome You are. There is no other god that can be compared to You and there is none above You. You are the Creator of heaven and earth, and everything belongs to You. My heart bursts with joy when I think of You.

**Prayer of Confession:**

These hearts of ours, made by You O God, beating life through our bodies, carrying our loves and hates, our fears and hopes; they are a miracle - a sanctuary, a temple for Your Spirit! They shape our values and drive our actions.

But, they also get distracted - enticed by all manner of things that lead us away from goodness and truth, from joy and love.

They need constant renewal, constant surgery to write Your law into their flesh, and to synchronise their beat with the rhythms of Your Spirit. Forgive us, O God, when we allow our hearts to be captured by what has no goodness, no beauty, no truth; forgive us when our hearts grow cold and hard, and we rob ourselves and others of love and of life.

## Silence

We praise You, Gracious and Loving God, for Your forgiveness, freely given; for renewed hearts that follow Your dream; and for the life that is promised when we willingly die to all that is less than our best, eternal, God - imaged humanity. **Amen**

### Hymn: **Beneath the cross of Jesus**

Keith Getty

**StF 442**

1. Beneath the cross of Jesus  
I fain would take my stand,  
the shadow of a mighty rock  
within a weary land;  
A home within the wilderness,  
a rest upon the way,  
from the burning of the noontide heat,  
and the burden of the day.

2. O safe and happy shelter,  
O refuge tried and sweet,  
O trysting place where heaven's love  
and heaven's justice meet!

As to the exiled patriarch  
that wondrous dream was given,  
so seems my Saviour's Cross to me -  
a ladder up to heaven.

3. There lies beneath its shadow,  
but on the further side,  
the darkness of an open grave  
that gapes both deep and wide;  
and there between us stands the cross,  
two arms outstretched to save,  
like watchman set to guard the way  
from that eternal grave.

### Old Testament Reading:

**Jeremiah 31:31-34.**

<sup>31</sup> "The days are coming," declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. <sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. <sup>33</sup> "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they will be my people. <sup>34</sup> No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD "For I will forgive their wickedness.

### New Testament Reading:

**John 12:20-33.**

<sup>20</sup> Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. <sup>21</sup> They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." <sup>22</sup> Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. <sup>25</sup> Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

<sup>27</sup> "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. <sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name!"

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." <sup>29</sup> The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

<sup>30</sup> Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. <sup>31</sup> Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup> And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." <sup>33</sup> He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

### **Message:**

#### **Dying We Live**

In early 2012, the internet was abuzz with the news that two new bills were to be debated in the United States Congress. The Stop Online Piracy Act and the Protect IP Act were both strongly protested by internet users and by thousands of websites that staged a blackout, including Wikipedia.

As a result, the vote was postponed. While almost everyone agrees that piracy is a problem, these bills were supported by strong lobby groups from the Recording Industry Association of America and the Motion Picture Association of America, both of which had been struggling against the rise of internet business models, independent artists and content producers, and new media consumption habits by purchasers of creative content.

While there may well be a need for some sort of strategy to protect artists and ensure they receive fair recompense for their work, the two bills that were proposed were certainly not the way to go. They amounted to little more than powerful groups seeking to maintain an old, dying status quo because they had not worked out how to adapt to a new environment. The label that is often applied to organisations like these is apt dinosaurs - as is that applied to the tactics used to try and maintain their privileged position in a changing economy - bullying.

Those who are deeply invested in the systems of the world always end up doing violence to those who seek to change them. The irony though, is that in seeking to save their 'lives' they almost always end up losing them. The same truth applies to every one of us as individuals. Whether in business, family, or in our own personal journey through the ages of life, whenever we seek to cling to a life that we know and want to protect, we find that, not only are we unable to stop the inevitability of change, but our attempts to do so result in us losing both the old life we seek to preserve and whatever new life we might be able to find if we were to open to the changes.

Which is why Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated a whole new way of being. It is a startling and seemingly contradictory message that Jesus proclaimed, but his metaphor remains profoundly compelling. The seed that falls into the ground must die if it is to find life - bearing fruit and bringing life to others. If it fails to die, paradoxically it ends up both dead and alone.

These words were spoken at a time when Jesus knew, or at least sensed, that he was soon to be the victim of powerful men who refused to navigate the changing world that he proclaimed. Since the raising of Lazarus, they had been frightened of losing power and of the possibility of some sort of rebellion, sparked by Jesus' message, that would bring Rome's might down on the nation. To be kind, they weren't completely self-serving, but there was certainly an element of personal agenda at work here.

The passage that is set for today in the Lectionary begins with a group of Greek people seeking to meet Jesus. The word 'Greek' did not necessarily mean people from Greece. It could be a reference simply to Greek-speaking Gentiles. Whatever their nationality, it is clear that John places their request at this point in his narrative to show the truth of the fearful statement of the religious leaders in the verse immediately preceding: "Look! The whole world is following him!" (John 12:19 CEB). They are concerned that they are losing power with no means to stop the process, and so, rather than lose the life they know, rather than allowing themselves to be the dying seeds that Jesus speaks about, they cling to the life they have, ultimately destroying Jesus in the process.

But, it is this very act that seals the loss of their safe, protected life of power, wealth and security. Dying, we live, says Jesus, but those with much to lose find this a very hard word.

### **Heart Surgery**

Perhaps this teaching of Jesus should not have been all that foreign to his listeners. It was not unlike other words that they had heard from the prophets. It must have resonated with the promise of the new covenant which had been spoken by Jeremiah centuries before.

The words of Jeremiah 31 were part of the 'Book of Consolation' spoken to a people who had felt like their lives were already lost, taken from them by force and exile. They'd had to make a new life for themselves in a strange country, although Jeremiah had assured them that to do so was the best course of action and that God would be with them even in their grief.

They had lost everything that they had held dear: their homeland, their Temple, their nationhood. Now, Jeremiah promised restoration, but it was a strangely disturbing message. It spoke of a new covenant, as if the old one was somehow incomplete. And it spoke about the law as now being engraved not on tablets of stone, but on their hearts.

Engraving anything on a heart involves major heart surgery! It threatens death, and the impact on the heart will be felt ever after. In order to have God's law written on the heart is no less of an operation. It requires letting go of the old life with an external law that could be obeyed or discarded at will. It requires a dying in order to allow the words to be inscribed, cut, into the flesh, so that they regulate the heart rate and pump the blood through the body.

That it is a metaphorical 'heart procedure' does not change the fact that what God was calling for was a complete re-orientation of their lives, their attitudes, their values and their motivations. And such a radical transformation can be just as traumatic and difficult as physical surgery. It was a glorious promise; of vibrant, abundant life lived in intimate communion with God. But to get to the promise was going to require death and a complete heart transplant.

Make no mistake, this dying to live is never easy. It was not easy for Jesus. John's gospel has no Gethsemane, but today's passage has an equivalent moment. In Verse 27 Jesus is suddenly overwhelmed by the magnitude of what he faces and he cries out, "Now My soul is deeply troubled. Should I pray, 'Father, save Me from this hour'?"

But this is the very reason I came!" (NLT). But, immediately he recognises that, whatever the pain that lies before him, this is also the way of glory.

In John's Gospel the cross is always viewed as the manifestation of God's glory in Christ. And now, following the closest thing we find to a Gethsemane in John, we get the closest thing we find to the transfiguration in John's Gospel. In Verse 28 Jesus prays, "Father, bring glory to Your name." And a voice from heaven replies, "I have already brought glory to My name, and I will do so again."

There is some confusion among the bystanders who don't understand what has happened. Some think the voice is just thunder, others believe it's an angel. But, for Jesus, it was a confirmation and an affirmation, not unlike the transfiguration in the Synoptics, that enables him to repeat publicly and with conviction what he said to Nicodemus in private in John 3: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself" (John 3:14,15).

Although the words resonate with the fear of the priests, represented by the visiting Greeks, what Jesus has in mind is something far more far-reaching. For Jesus this is no popularity contest in which he gains more 'followers' than the religious leaders, like some kind of ancient celebrity Twitterfest. For Jesus, drawing all people to himself is about the creation of a radically new world.

It is not just the hearts of the people that are transplanted and receive God's law. It is the entire cosmos that has a change of heart, and that is brought into glorious, life-giving unity with God and with one another in Christ. For Jesus, drawing all people to himself, is the true fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy - a world of peace, justice, grace, and communion.

### **The Moment of Glory**

It seems that it is the arrival of the Greeks that brings Jesus to the realisation that his 'hour' has come. It is the time for Jesus to "enter his glory", which clearly means the cross, judging by the moment of anguish which follows in which he questions whether he should pray for God to keep him from this 'hour'.

If you had asked any of Jesus' disciples how the cross could be a moment of glory, they would certainly have looked back at you blank-faced. But years later, as the Gospel of John was being written, the followers of Jesus had finally understood it. They now knew that in the cross they had received a profound revelation of God and of God's purpose.

The cross is the most glorious moment in all of history because it reveals in no uncertain terms that the worst that the forces of evil can do is insufficient to quench God's love and justice. It's the moment when Jesus reveals that life can be lived differently, free from the tyranny of hatred, retaliation and escalating violence. It's the moment when evil is rendered powerless (for what more can be done to coerce someone when death is no longer a threat?) and when God's Reign is truly manifest on the earth. It's the moment when Jesus opens the door to life, showing all who care to see how to discover the authentic, abundant life that he proclaimed. It's his moment of harvest, the moment when everything changes for the entire cosmos.

This crucified moment is like Jeremiah's promise to the despairing exiles, only far better. Jeremiah's word was a 'resetting' of history for the Israelites, offering them a

world that was no longer defined by their rebellion, a world in which the children would no longer suffer for the sins of their parents (Jeremiah 31:29). What this means is that the people now have a world of possibilities, with the freedom to choose how they will live and what future they will create in partnership with God for themselves.

But it is God taking the initiative. They do not have to do anything to 'earn' this promise. It is theirs by virtue of God's gracious decision and nothing else. The world they are now invited into is completely new, discontinuous with everything that has gone before. It's a world where finally the thirst of the people for justice, peace, and goodness can be thoroughly quenched.

It is this kind of world that the cross offers to us now, a world that is forever changed, forever new, and that is shot through with the glory of self-giving love and undeserved grace.

In this moment in which Jesus enters his glory, God's life, forgiveness, justice, peace and presence are irresistibly loosed on the world. As much as evil may continue to work its destructive ways, God's glory has now been set in motion and it cannot be stopped. All that can happen is for it to slowly, inexorably, filter through all human experience, through every corner of the universe, and through every fraction of time.

### **The Moment Of Judgment**

Jesus doesn't stop at calling his coming time an hour of glory. It is also "the time for judging this world" (John 12: 31). At the moment of Jesus' crucifixion, when God's glory shines most brightly, so too does God's judgment. It's not so much a judgment of punishment, but a judgment in the sense of an 'evaluation', a true measure, a clear understanding.

The cross is the moment when evil - Satan is the word Jesus uses - is revealed for it's true nature. All the promises and rewards that injustice, violence, pride, and greed have made are shown to be nothing more and nothing less than the road to destruction. The cross reveals the lengths that those who are invested in the status quo will go to in order to retain their power and position. But it is exactly this reaction, this revealing of the true nature of the systems of Empire, that ensure its demise.

The new covenant is a judgment because it reveals how the old covenant and its law have been used for the opposite of its purpose. Rather than creating a liberated people, it has become a tool of oppression. Rather than lead people to love for God and neighbour, it has been used in service of self-love and exclusion. But, once the true nature of the old world is revealed, it becomes much harder to sustain it. The new, truly liberating reality gains a strength and momentum that is irresistible and that inevitably ends the rule of evil.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, William Barclay tells the story of a fourth century monk named Telemachus. In his search for God, Telemachus had retreated into the desert, to remove himself from people and search only after God with his whole being. After some time, though, he realised that his quest was not as selfless as he had thought but was actually rather selfish. In order to love God, he realised, he needed to love and serve people. The cities were full of people and there was great need there. And so, it was to the city of Rome that Telemachus went. Although Rome was by this time officially Christian, the arena with its gladiatorial fights and ravenous animals still remained. Masses of people still flooded into the arena on holidays to

watch the blood-letting and violence that was provided for their entertainment by unfortunate prisoners of war.

When Telemachus arrived, the arena was packed with 80,000 people ready for the gladiators to begin their contest. As the fight began, the old monk was horrified, and he jumped over the barrier into the middle of the fray. Again and again he called for the fighting to stop, but the crowds only jeered him and began throwing stones at him. Finally, a command was given to one of the gladiators and he cut Telemachus down. But then a great silence fell over the arena as, in the death of this innocent, holy man, the people saw what they were doing for what it was. The games ended immediately and they were never held again. In his death, and in the judgment of the games that it pronounced, Telemachus ended a great evil. It was as the gladiators did what they were supposed to do that the true nature of the games was revealed and this ensured their demise.

In the same way, the cross reveals the true nature of human Empire of every kind and in the revelation, evil is judged and begins to die. Any moment of judgment leaves us with a choice though.

We can cling to our lives as they are, and the systems that sustain them, in which case we become part of the violence and injustice of the system. Or we can release the life we have known, we can refuse to give our allegiance to the systems of Empire, and we can give our lives for the realisation of the Promised Land of God's Reign. One thing is certain though. We cannot enter the Promised Land if we refuse to leave the old country. We cannot enjoy the new covenant if we remain obsessed with the old.

We may never be able to live outside of the systems of this world. We will always, in some sense, have to work within them and use them, hopefully wisely. But we do not have to be devotees of the system. We do not have to give our energy and resources and time to sustain the injustices and oppression that our systems too often generate. Rather, by embracing the values and purposes of God's Reign we can allow our lives to reveal the glory of God's ways and to judge the system where necessary, while seeking to bring change. Nevertheless, we will have to choose, daily, who we will serve.

## **Choosing Glory**

There is much that we call glory in our world that is anything but. Military conquest is not glorious. Nor are extravagant displays of wealth or excess. Nor is any short-lived sporting achievement or acquisition of celebrity status. There is no true glory in any of these things.

Glory is what reveals the true nature of reality, the Promised Land which is present and active within the mundanity of the natural world. Glory is when God breaks into our lives and brings radical, life-giving transformation. Glory is Christ being committed enough to love that he would allow himself to be executed. Glory is when ordinary people begin to believe that we can participate in bringing a radically new order of justice and peace into being in our world.

The challenge which we all must face in this Lenten season, especially as we now move into the Holy Week meditations, is to which glory we will give ourselves.

Once we have tasted the Promised Land, there is no going back. Once the vision of God's Reign has performed its surgery on our hearts, we can no longer settle for anything less.

Entering this Promised Land may feel like a death - it is a death - but it is only the seed that dies that truly lives. Dying, we live and we generate life for others. But if we will risk it, if we will submit ourselves to the Divine Surgeon's blade, we will awaken into a whole new world, a Land of Promise, of peace, justice, grace and freedom.

The Promised Land is there. It's waiting...

**Hymn:**            **Come and see, come and see**            Graham Kendrick            **StF 270**

1. Come and see, come and see  
Come and see the King of love  
See the purple robe and crown of thorns  
he wears  
Soldiers mock, rulers sneer  
As he lifts the cruel cross  
Lone and friendless now he climbs  
towards the hill

**We worship at your feet where wrath  
and mercy meet  
And a guilty world is washed by  
love's pure stream  
For us he was made sin. Oh, help me  
take it in  
Deep wounds of love cry out 'Father,  
forgive'  
I worship, I worship. The Lamb who  
was slain.**

**Prayers of Intercession:**

Jesus, our Teacher, our Healer, our Monarch:

In You we see God's glory revealed;  
In You we see the truth of things - evil judged and goodness celebrated;  
In You our hearts are renewed, and our lives carry the marks of eternity.

**We thank You, Dear Jesus, for all that You are to us.**

In Your love and mercy, Jesus, You have called us to prayer for ourselves, for others  
and for our world.

**We pray that You would write Your law on our hearts:**

that love, acceptance, forgiveness and justice become the most natural habits of our  
lives.

**We pray that You would show Your glory to all people:**

2. Come and weep, come and mourn  
For your sin that pierced him there  
So much deeper than the wounds of  
thorn and nail  
All our pride, all our greed  
All our fallenness and shame  
And the Lord has laid the punishment on  
him.

**We worship...**

3. Man of heaven, born to earth  
To restore us to your heaven  
Here we bow in awe beneath  
Your searching eyes  
From your tears comes our joy  
From your death our life shall spring  
By your resurrection power we shall  
rise.

**We worship...**

that every woman, man and child would know You and that Your love, Your presence and Your purpose would be the guiding principles of our world.

**We pray that You would expose evil, corruption and injustice wherever they may be at work:**

that all who are oppressed, abused or exploited may be liberated and restored, and that all who live by violence, deception and manipulation may be restrained, healed and transformed.

**Silent prayer may be offered.**

We praise You, Jesus, for Your vision of a new, healed world, and for giving Your life so that it could be brought into being.

**And we pray that You would use our prayers, and each of us who has prayed, to enable Your Reign to come and Your will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.**

**Hymn:**

**And can it be**

Charles Wesley

**StF: 345 / H&P: 216**

1. And can it be that I should gain  
An int'rest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died He for me, who caused His pain?  
For me, who Him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! how can it be  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for  
me?  
Amazing love! how can it be  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for  
me?

2. 'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies!  
Who can explore His strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love Divine!  
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,  
Let angel minds inquire no more.  
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,  
Let angel minds inquire no more.

3. He left His Father's throne above,  
So free, so infinite His grace;  
Emptied Himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam's helpless race:

'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
For, O my God, it found out me.  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
For, O my God, it found out me.

4. Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

5. No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!  
Alive in Him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness Divine,  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my  
own.  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my  
own.

**Benediction:**

Now is the time for God's glory to be revealed in us; now is the moment for us to give our lives again to follow Jesus and proclaim God's Promised Land:

**We go in the name of Christ; we go as devoted disciples of Christ; and we go to live as the body of Christ for the sake of God's glory. Amen.**