

WORSHIP AT HOME FOR 7TH FEBRUARY 2021 – GOD AT WORK

Dear Friends,

So the time goes on – though now with so many having received the first vaccination. Truly – light at the end of the tunnel! The time when we can all worship together again is ever closer. During this W@H we shall find how Jesus shows us his priorities. He knows what he must do and demonstrates this by healing and proclaiming the good news. However, Jesus also takes time out to get away from the crowds so that he can be alone in prayer. He knows what he must do to care for himself so that he can stay true to his mission. Do we find – or make – enough time to rest with God? What difference does that make in our lives? *God bless. Margaret*

Call to worship: Those who grow weary – come to the Lord!
Those who feel faint – come to the Lord!
Those who feel exhausted – come to the Lord!
You shall soar as eagles on wings.

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The creator waits on you to lift you, love you and renew you in strength.

The words to ‘My God, how wonderful thou art’ written by Frederick William Faber [1814-1863] HP 51

1 My God, how wonderful thou art, thy majesty how bright,
How beautiful thy mercy seat, in depths of burning light?

2 How dread are thine eternal years, O everlasting Lord,
By prostrate spirits day and night incessantly adored!

3 How beautiful, how beautiful, the sight of thee must be;
Thine endless wisdom, boundless power, and awesome purity!

4 O how I fear thee, living God, with deepest, tenderest fears,
And worship thee with trembling hope and penitential tears!

5 Yet I may love thee too, O Lord, almighty as thou art,
For thou has stooped to ask of me the love of my poor heart.

6 No earthly father loves like thee; no mother, e'er so mild,
Bears and forbears as thou hast done with me, thy sinful child.

7 Father of Jesus, love's reward, what rapture it will be
Prostrate before thy throne to lie, and gaze, and gaze on thee.

Prayer: Everlasting God, creator of heaven and earth, your love causes our hearts to soar. You know the number of stars in the universe – just as you know the number of hairs on our head.

You call each star by name – just as you call each of us by name. You supply the earth with rain to make the grass grow, and provide food for animals and birds – just as you provide all that we need to sustain us.

Mighty God, you care about the details, seeing every tiny part of the bigger picture – just as you care about the tiniest detail in our lives, for you know the person you created each of us to be. Mighty God, we love you and praise you.

Lord, there were always people! People everywhere, day in and day out. All seeking you Lord – hunting you, following you – hungry for your presence and wanting your attention. Yet not once did you complain. Lord, we are sorry that for us the weight of life's demands makes us stumble, sometimes lose our temper – even sometimes to buckle under the pressure. Help us to be more like you, Lord.

There are times when we just don't get our priorities right, and we are sorry. Help us to know, as you did, the importance of spending time with – and drawing refreshment from – the Father.

There are times when we let other people and things take over our lives and so to squeeze out the time we spend with you, Lord. Help us to draw daily on your refreshing strength so that we can cope with whatever our day holds. **Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

The Son of God loves us – and because of his love, healing us and setting us free from sin’s guilt and power, we are forgiven. **Thanks be to God. Amen**

Thank you, Lord, that we can come to you to recharge our batteries – and that we can come alongside others in your strength and serve our community in those areas where we have been healed and so can relate to others in need. Thank you, Lord. **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.

Introduction to Old Testament reading; Isaiah speaks the word of the Lord to an oppressed and exiled people. The Israelites have seen Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed by the Babylonians, and they feel that the Lord has forgotten about them. Isaiah here paints them a picture of the all-embracing power and majesty of God, who sweeps princes away like the waste of harvest but who lifts up those who are weary so they can soar like eagles. These words and the picture they paint can lift the heart and so enable a renewed hope in God. In this prophecy, Isaiah also presents a powerful challenge to other systems of domination. For him this meant the gods of Babylon. What does it mean for us – increased consumerism of society, perhaps. As Walter Brueggemann comments: God is not obsolete but vividly active, countering oppressive human built systems with the offer of life.

Isaiah 40: 21-31: taken from the Living Bible paraphrased.

“Are you so ignorant? Are you so deaf to the words of God – the words he gave before the worlds began? Have you never heard or understood? It is God who sits above the circle of the earth. [The people below must seem to him like grasshoppers!] he is the one who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and makes his tent from them. He dooms the great men of the world and brings them all to naught. They hardly get started, barely take root, when he blows on them and their work withers and the wind carries them off like straw.

‘With whom will you compare me? Who is my equal?’ asks the Holy One. ‘Look up into the heavens! Who created all these stars? As a shepherd leads his sheep, calling each by its pet name, and counts them to see that none are lost or strayed, so God does with stars and planets!

O Jacob, O Israel, how can you say that the Lord doesn’t see your troubles and isn’t being fair? Don’t you yet understand? Don’t you know by now that the everlasting God, the Creator of the farthest parts of earth never grows faint or weary? No-one can fathom the depths of his understanding. He gives power to the tired and worn out, and strength to the weak. Even the youths shall be exhausted, and the young men will give up. But they that wait upon 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.

Mark 1: 29-39: Then, leaving the synagogue, he and his disciples went over to Simon and Andrew’s home, where they found Simon’s mother-in-law sick in bed with a high fever. They told Jesus about her right away. He went to her bedside, and as he took her by the hand and helped her to sit up, the fever suddenly left, and she got up and prepared dinner for them!

By sunset the courtyard was filled with the sick and the demon-possessed, brought to him for healing; and a huge crowd of people from all over the city of Capernaum gathered outside the door to watch. So Jesus healed great numbers of sick folk that evening, and ordered many demons to come out of their victims. [But he refused to allow the demons to speak, because they knew who he was.]

The next morning he was up long before daybreak and went out alone into the wilderness to pray. Later, Simon and the others went out to find him, and told him; 'Everyone is asking for you.' But he replied; 'We must go on to other towns as well, and give my message to them too, for that is why I came.' So he travelled throughout the province of Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and releasing many from the power of demons.

Comment: Isaiah tells us that God is Almighty and that he gives power to the faint and strength to the weary. There is no doubt of God's power or that he knows all that he has made. Then he tells us: 'Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength'. Surely something we should all take to heart in our lives. When we move to Mark's gospel and its first chapter we get a glimpse of just how busy Jesus was. On the day of rest he went to the synagogue where he taught with authority and also healed a man who had an unclean spirit. Then at mid-day he went back to Simon Peter's home where they discovered that Simon's mother-in-law was burning with fever and had to take to her bed. Jesus immediately went to her, took her by the hand and raised her up. She instantly feels well again and sets out to look after her guests. Some things to notice and to think about here – firstly, it would seem that Simon Peter was married – secondly, that Jesus often depended on the care of such women as the disciple's mother-in-law. Thirdly – a point for us to ponder – are there times in our lives when we have felt Jesus take us by the hand and helped us to rise – to get back into life? Times when we are knocked aside with sickness or fear of the future, and we know that he comes to us in his compassion to give us strength.

It was the Sabbath and so movement was restricted until the sun went down when a new day would begin. As there were no clocks, it was said to be evening when three stars could be seen in the sky, or when the last rays of sunlight had gone. The people of the town waited patiently for that time but were very anxious not to miss Jesus and so as soon as it was dark the streets were full of people hurrying to see Jesus, bringing their sick with them. Jesus must have looked after people well into the night – can we imagine how exhausted he must have become? No-one can go on pouring out their energies without needing to be renewed and refreshed – and Jesus was no exception. We are told he needed new power and so he went out 'while it was still dark...to a deserted place and prayed' – he knew that he must maintain that constant link with the Father. Jesus put himself out to make sure he got up extra early, even after that exhausting day, so that he could find somewhere where he could be quiet – and there he prayed.

As David Adam points out in his 'Sermon Illustrations' - if Jesus felt the need to do this it is clear that we, too, must make the time to pray and to maintain our contact with him and with God. We often lack power and energy because we try to keep going in our own strength. Remember those words of Isaiah: 'Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength'.

The words of 'How shall they hear' written by Timothy Dudley-Smith [b. 1926] Mission Praise 250

1 How shall they hear, who have not heard news of a Lord who loved and came?

Nor known his reconciling word, nor learned to trust the Saviour's name.

2 To all the world, to every place, neighbours and friends and far-off lands,
Preach the good news of saving grace; go while the great commission stands.

3 'Whom shall I send?' Who hears the call, constant in prayer through toil and pain,
Telling of One who died for all, to bring a lost world home again.

4 'Lord, here am I,' your fire impart to this poor cold self-centred soul;
Touch but my lips, my hands, my heart, and make a world for Christ my goal.

5 Spirit of love, within us move: Spirit of truth, in power come down!

So shall they hear and find and prove Christ is their life, their joy, their crown.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, you gave of yourself without counting the cost, offering even your own life for the life of the world. So now we pray for all those who seek to love you in return, however hesitant, however partial, or imperfect their love might be. Inspire them through your love.

We pray for those who are new in their faith, still learning more of you, maybe uncertain of their commitment but still discovering yet more of your love. Keep their love always growing.

We pray for those who are established in their faith – facing the daily risk of growing complacent, stale, settled into a comfortable routine. Make their love ever fresh.

We pray for those whose faith has crumbled – no longer holding the trust they once held – no longer feeling you close by their sides – no longer seeking to follow Christ. Renew their love.

We pray for those who have never had faith; those who are constantly unmoved by the message of the Gospel – those who resist its challenge despite themselves, and those who go willingly against your will. Kindle a love for you in their hearts.

We pray for those whose faith is costly – those who sacrifice time, energy, money, security, health – sometimes even life itself. Reward their love.

And we pray for those who need something in which to put their faith – the poor, the hungry, and the homeless – the sick, the suffering and the bereaved – all those who are broken by the tragedies and crises of life. May they experience the fullness of your love.

Lord Jesus Christ, your love is for all, whoever they may be. May it reach out into every heart in every place – and may we be a part of that, learning to love you as you love us. **Amen**

And a prayer for ourselves:

Loving God, we thank you for the ways you speak to us, through Scripture, prayer and worship, through fellowship of your people and the daily experience of life. We thank you for the ways you have spoken to your people across the ages, the ways you speak to us today, and the ways you will continue to speak in the days ahead. But today we ask for your help in those times when you seem to be silent, those days when we do not hear your voice no matter how we listen for it, those times when we feel ourselves to be alone and far from you. Give us courage then to ask if we have closed our hearts and minds to what you would say, or if there is something in our lives creating a barrier between us, preventing us from getting close to you. But help us also to understand there are times when you expect us to get on with our discipleship without you always directing us, without your instructions being spelt out step by step. Help us to see that your silence may not be a sign of our faithlessness or your displeasure, but rather of your love, offering us the opportunity to grow towards Christian maturity. And when we do not hear you speak help us to remember all those times you have spoken unmistakably, to us and to others, and let those moments sustain and direct us until your word comes again, in your own time and your own way.

Loving God, open our hearts to all you would say to us, in the name of Christ. **Amen.**

1 Corinthians 9: 16-23: Paul writes: ‘For just preaching the Gospel isn’t any credit to me – I couldn’t keep from preaching if I wanted to. I would be utterly miserable. Woe unto me if I don’t.

If I were volunteering my services of my own free will, the Lord would give me a special reward, but that is not the situation, for God has picked me out and given me this sacred trust and I have no choice. Under this circumstance, what is my pay? It is the special joy I get from preaching the Good News without expense to anyone, never demanding my rights. And this has a real advantage. I am not bound to obey anyone just because he pays my salary; yet I have freely and happily become a servant of any and all so that I can win them to Christ. When I am with the Jews I am seen as one of them so that they will listen to the Gospel and I can win them to Christ. When I am with Gentiles who follow Jewish customs and ceremonies I don’t argue, even though I don’t agree, because I want to help them. When with the heathen, I agree with them as much as I can, except, of course, that I must always do what is right as a Christian. And so, by agreeing, I can win their confidence and help them too.

When I am with those whose consciences bother them easily, I don't act as though I know it all and don't say that they are foolish; the result is that they are willing to let me help them. Yes, whatever a person is like, I try to find common ground with him so that he will let me tell him about Christ and let Christ save him. I do this to get the Gospel to them and also for the blessing I myself receive when I see them come to Christ.

Comment: Paul is absolutely certain that no wages are ever due to him. To him, being a minister of the Gospel is not a 'job' for which he should be paid. He is rewarded – but that reward is the preaching itself – to share with others freely the free gift that he has been given, through the gospel. He is not free to dictate the terms under which he proclaims God's message. It isn't up to him to insist that the people accept the message in the package which he wants. David Adam says that: 'it almost sounds as if Paul is saying that he will sink to any kind of subterfuge to make himself acceptable to people, but that is to miss the sense of compulsion in Paul's description of his relationship to his calling.' So it would seem that he is there to be used by others – Paul himself has no other purpose than to preach the gospel. In his way of working with others, he is freely available to each and everyone. Perhaps the Corinthians felt that being an Apostle would make him feel more powerful than anyone else [or at least a way of getting his board and lodging for free] but Paul goes on trying to explain that to proclaim the gospel is to be at God's disposal – and to be at the disposal of others. To proclaim the truth he needed to abandon himself to whatever God needed him to say and do.

Nowadays we, too, need to get alongside other people in a way sympathetic to their understanding of life if we truly want to get the good news across to them. It is no good talking to people in a completely alien way – after all, our only longing is for everyone to have the opportunity to hear about the good news of the gospel and turn to God themselves.

The words to: 'Come, sinners, to the gospel feast' written by Charles Wesley [1707-1788] StF 401

1 Come, sinners, to the gospel feast, let every soul be Jesu's guest;

You need not one be left behind for God has called all humankind.

2 Sent by my Lord, on you I call, the invitation is to all;

Come, all the world and witness how all things in Christ are ready now.

3 Come, all you souls by sin oppressed, you restless wanderers after rest,

You poor, and maimed, and sick, and blind, in Christ a hearty welcome find.

4 His love is mighty to compel; his conquering love consent to feel;

Yield to his love's resistless power, and fight against your God no more.

5 See him set forth before your eyes; behold the bleeding sacrifice!

His offered benefits embrace, and freely now be saved by grace.

6 This is the time! No more delay! This is the Lord's accepted day;

Come in, this moment, at his call, and live for him who died for all.

Closing Prayer: Lord, we are your people. You have called us by name and lavished your love upon us. We go into the week bearing your name on our lips and your love in our lives. As your people, may we so live and speak that our neighbours will give thanks to God and their lives to Christ. **Amen**

And may the blessing of God – the Father who created us – the Son who found us and saved us – and the Holy Spirit who lives and works within us – be with us and with all whom we love this day and for evermore. **Amen**