

## Basingstoke and Reading Circuit Service 1 May 2022

Prepared by Rev Martin Beukes

### Call to Worship Psalm 30 from Singing the Faith 808

I will exalt you, O Lord, because you have raised me up

**and have not let my foes triumph over me.**

O Lord my God, I cried out to you

**and you have healed me.**

You brought me up, O Lord, from the dead ;

**you restored me to life from among those that go down to the pit.**

Sing to the Lord, you servants of his ;

**give thanks to his holy name.**

You have turned my mourning into dancing ;

**you have put off my sackcloth and girded me with gladness ;**

Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing ;

**O Lord my God, I will give you thanks for ever.**

**Hymn: A charge to keep I have (StF 658) - Charles Wesley (1707–1788)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1M-64OwBK1E>

1. A charge to keep I have: a God to glorify; a never-dying soul to save, and fit it for the sky;	3. Arm me with jealous care, as in your sight to live; and O your servant, Lord, prepare a strict account to give!
2. To serve the present age, my calling to fulfil; O may it all my powers engage to do my Master's will!	4. Help me to watch and pray, and on yourself rely, so shall I not my trust betray, nor love within me die.

### Prayers and LP

Ever-gracious Lord Jesus, you reach out to us by coming to live among frail humanity as an equally frail baby; You show how to live God's love in our words and actions to every God cherished person we encounter; you choose to suffer betrayal, heartache, and isolation to remind your wondering people of God's great love for them.

Ever-loving God, we are not a faithful people; we have left undone the things you call us to; we have loved ourselves and not those you have placed across our paths. Forgive us. Forgive us for our selfishness, self-deceit, and wandering attention to your presence in our lives.

In the quiet we bring to you all our own sin, pain, and failure. *Hold a moment of silence...*

### Say the Lord's Prayer.

Hear the words which Jesus spoke so many times to those he encountered on the way, and may they ring true in your ears this day: 'Your sins are forgiven, go in peace.' Amen.

**Hymn: Be still, for the presence of the Lord (StF 20)** - David J. Evans (b. 1957)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKfyudrhGK4>

<p>1. Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here; come bow before him now with reverence and fear: in him no sin is found — we stand on holy ground. Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here.</p> <p>2. Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around; he burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned:</p>	<p>how awesome is the sight — our radiant King of light! Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.</p> <p>3. Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place; he comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace: no work too hard for him — in faith receive from him. Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.</p>
--	--

**Readings: John 21:12-19 and Acts 9:1-20**

### **Sermon: A Call to Witness**

As we reflect on all that Jesus has done for us, coming in frailty as a baby, living among and loving fallen humanity without falling into our patterns of self-destruction and sin, suffering all sorts of betrayals, exclusions, and ultimately death to prove God's great love for us: what does Jesus ask of us?

It is hard to exemplify what Jesus asks of us in better terms in the lives of those people who have best lived God's love for all the world to see. Those who have lived lives changed by their encounters with Jesus.

In an amazing book about the impact of Jesus' life on the world, culture, and everything we take for granted, John Ortberg tells us about the impact of Jesus' followers. It tells of how Jesus' followers were unable to bear the custom of leaving disabled children, or unwanted children, or girls, to the elements to die and so they formed orphanages to care for unwanted children themselves. It tells of how Jesus followers saw the needs of the sick and the injured and hearing Jesus words to 'do likewise' gave their time, skill, and money to forming hospitals to care for the sick. It tells of how Jesus' followers fought injustice, challenged governments, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and even gave their lives so that the world would better reflect God's kingdom.

The book captures an amazing image of the impact of Jesus followers through the centuries, but that all began with two specific followers. Two people who were deeply flawed in their own ways. Two people who were passionate about serving their Lord, to the point of giving their lives and becoming martyrs. But it isn't their own extraordinariness, or their particular gifts and skills that make them an example to us of what Jesus asks, rather it is their ordinariness. Their ordinary struggles and failures and the way Jesus turned Peter and Paul into the people who would share the Good News with a whole generation of Jesus followers!

The Greek word for witness used in the New Testament is *martus*. It literally means witness, to share what you have seen, heard, and experienced. But it is also the word that the English martyr comes from. Of course, both Peter and Paul were martyred – in our modern meaning of dying for their faith – but first they were martyrs in the ancient meaning: they were witnesses. And before they were witnesses, they failed. Badly!

Neither of them brought any great skill into their work as witnesses. Peter was a fisherman, we can infer from scripture that his family-owned boats, so could not have been thought of as unskilled or uneducated. It takes skill to run or own or maintain the family business. But he was also a bit of a coward, who is quick to

fight – drawing a sword to protect Jesus at his arrest – but equally quick to deny Jesus three times – even when only challenged by the extraordinarily frightening presence of a young cleaner girl. The Gospels show us that if he is exceptional in any way, he is exceptionally gifted at putting his foot in his mouth.

Paul brings a little more skill to the role, but not that much. He is rather good at blowing his own trumpet, describing himself as “I am a Jew... [who] studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors... just as zealous for God as any of you are today” (Acts 22:3 NIV) and there are more wonderful examples in Scripture. Paul’s real gift is that he sees so clearly that God’s own people are Israel, especially the parts of Israel who strictly keep the covenant according to the interpretation of the Pharisees. Every single rule exactly kept. He can see no other way for God to regard fallen humanity. He is so certain that this is the only way, he actively goes seeking permission from the Priests to go and arrest anyone who is a member of this irritating new strand of Judaism which calls itself The Way. Even if it means he has to dismantle this new insult to God one heretic at a time!

But that is not the end of God’s story with Peter and Paul. They are more than their greatest failing: even when those failings are denying Jesus as he suffers and dies to show God’s love to the world, or arresting people to the interrogated, abused, or even killed for their trust in Jesus!

In our reading from John’s Gospel, we see Jesus ask Peter 3 times to feed his lambs. Three times Jesus calls him again to be the Rock the church is built on. Jesus know that the rock did not hold up well to questioning and would probably be better described as jelly. Jesus knows that asking him three times is going to bring back the memory of his greatest failing. But this happens because Jesus is redeeming his failure, so that it never holds Peter back as a witness. Jesus restores his greatest failing, his temptation, his lesser self he is happy to settle for so that he can witness to Jesus with his life.

In our reading from Acts, we have our ever-certain Saul, who sees the only way to please God and has lived it all his life. Saul who is willing to cause others to suffer if they believe differently? He set’s out on a journey, with permission in hand to go and weed out all who see or think differently to him. And so, Jesus does the only thing that makes sense in the moment and takes away his sight. How else do you make a man who sees so clearly, especially clearly and wrongly, take pause to see what God is really doing. You make him blind and reliant on God once again. It feels a very harsh way to highlight his biggest failing. But this happens because Jesus is redeeming his failure, so that it never holds Paul back as a witness. Jesus restores his greatest failing, his temptation, the lesser self he is happy to settle for so that he can witness to Jesus with his life.

Peter and Paul are the witnesses to Jesus’ grace, to God’s love, and to all creation being made new, not because they have extraordinary skills, but because they have extraordinary failures, redeemed by Jesus.

Have you ever wondered; how could Jesus use you to be a witness? Simple, look at the moments you have failed and Jesus had scraped you up off the floor; look at the moments you have been in so much pain that you could not see how life could go on and Jesus helped you put one foot in front of another as you walked through it together; look at the moment when you were so far from any good path that life seemed there was no other way but Jesus slowly carried you back. It hurts. A lot! But if we allow Jesus into these places in our lives, we discover there within us, within our pain, failures, and sufferings, an opportunity to be witnesses to Jesus. Not because we are exceptional, but because every person we see on the street also sits next to a pool of tears that Jesus needs to redeem.

So, if Peter and Paul have anything in common, it is not their successes as witnesses to Jesus’ Way, it is in Jesus taking the worst pain of their lives and turning it into an invitation to share God’s love. An invitation to connect with others worst pains. An invitation to bring their real stories to other people’s real stories, and to find the grace of God there together.

**Prayer** By Laurent Vernet; Prayerbook 2017/18

Let us choose to follow you wherever you are and wherever you go:  
in the narrow lanes of the refugee camps,  
in the homeless hostels, hospitals, and hospices,  
in the foodbanks, in the streets, and with the lonely.

Strengthen us to resist the easy temptation of compliance:  
in the illusions and comfort of our chosen worlds,  
in the stories we tell ourselves away from reality,  
in the excuses we choose to accept, instead of doing what we should.

Guide us to choose to be free,  
To follow you wherever you are,  
To follow you wherever you call us to be. Amen.

**Hymn: Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult (StF 250)** - Cecil Frances Alexander (1818–1895)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idAoS7at3nQ>

1. Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult of our life's wild restless sea, day by day his voice is sounding, saying: 'Christian, follow me.'	from each idol that would keep us, saying: 'Christian, love me more.'
2. As of old apostles heard it by the Galilean lake, turned from home and toil and kindred, leaving all for his dear sake.	4. In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease, still he calls, in cares and pleasures: 'Christian, love me more than these.'
3. Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store,	5. Jesus calls us! By your mercies, Saviour, may we hear your call, give our hearts to your obedience, serve and love you best of all.

**Intercessions**

Is there anything to celebrate give thanks to God for? Or is there anything to bring to God in prayer?

*Take a few moments to pray for the thanksgivings and concerns you have or your group shares with you.*

**Hymn: Thine be the glory (StF 313)** - Edmond Budry (1854–1932) translated by Richard Birch Hoyle (1875–1939)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaoV5w2Qfag>

1. Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son, endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won; angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away, kept the folded grave-clothes where thy body lay: <i>Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son, endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.</i>	lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom; let the Church with gladness hymns of triumph sing, for her Lord now liveth, death hath lost its sting:
2. Lo, Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb;	3. No more we doubt thee, glorious Prince of Life; life is naught without thee: aid us in our strife; make us more than conquerors through thy deathless love; bring us safe through Jordan to thy home above:

**Blessing**

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, ever more. Amen.

Go, in the power of the resurrected Jesus, to live God's love.