

Isaiah's call to place our trust in God:

²⁸ Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
²⁹ He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
³¹ but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

(Isaiah chapter 40)

Hymn: StF15 The splendour of the King

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sm7TX0Xt4Xc>

<p>1 The splendour of the King, clothed in majesty ; let all the earth rejoice, let all the earth rejoice. He wraps himself in light and darkness tries to hide, and trembles at his voice, and trembles at his voice. <i>How great is our God, sing with me, how great is our God, and all will see how great, how great is our God.</i></p> <p>2 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, the Lion and the Lamb.</p>	<p><i>How great is our God, sing with me, how great is our God, and all will see how great, how great is our God.</i></p> <p>Name above all names, worthy of all praise ; my heart will sing : how great is our God. Name above all names, worthy of all praise ; my heart will sing : how great is our God. <i>How great is our God, sing with me, how great is our God, and all will see how great, how great is our God.</i></p> <p>Chris Tomlin (b. 1972), Ed Cash and Jesse Reeves</p>
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Prayer

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, you Lord are the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the Earth. You do not grow tired or weary. You are more than we can understand or fathom.

We come before you to give you worship and praise. We give you thanks that you care for us and, as Isaiah wrote, you renew our strength that we may run and not grow weary, walk and not be faint, and even soar like eagles.

As we ponder the words of Isaiah and the mystery of your love, we acknowledge our weakness as we have strayed from your ways. Forgive us and empower us to follow you.

Lord, we thank you that you do not hold our sins against us. Your first remedy to our sinfulness is that you forgive us through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Your second remedy is to send your Spirit amongst us to renew us from the inside in the image of Jesus. We know we are so far from this goal, but you stick with us. We have faith that, at the end, your love will triumph and we will know the fullness of your kingdom reality.

So Lord, we approach you in confidence that you are here with us through your Spirit. We ask you to make your presence known. Teach us and guide us. Enable us in our worship.

Lord, we make these prayers in the name of our Lord Jesus in thankfulness for your loving kindness. Amen

About the readings

Both our readings are from the New Testament. The connection I develop between them in the sermon will be centred on the 'servant'. This word is central to the gospel reading in a reference back to Isaiah's 'suffering servant'. Hopefully this fits in with the Bible Month series on Isaiah that is being followed around the Circuit. The word 'servant' features less directly, but more frequently, in the reading from Acts where it creeps in under the radar as an essential characteristic of those through whom God works.

Before we hear the readings, let us sing a hymn that focuses on Jesus as servant. Jesus came 'not to be served, but to serve'. The hymn moves on to set the pattern for our discipleship: 'So let us learn how to serve him, and in our lives enthrone him.'

Hymn: StF272 From heaven you came, helpless babe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VeQrWmvCms>

<p>1 From heaven you came, helpless babe, entered our world, your glory veiled, not to be served but to serve, and give your life that we might live.</p> <p><i>This is our God, the Servant King, he calls us now to follow him, to bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to the Servant King.</i></p> <p>2 There in the garden of tears my heavy load he chose to bear ; his heart with sorrow was torn, 'Yet not my will but yours,' he said.</p>	<p>3 Come see his hands and his feet, the scars that speak of sacrifice, hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered.</p> <p>4 So let us learn how to serve and in our lives enthrone him, each other's needs to prefer, for it is Christ we're serving.</p> <p>Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)</p>
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Readings:

Matthew 12:13-21

Acts 4:23-31

Sermon: Being God's servant

My grandmother had the wonderful name of Nellie. She was born in 1896. She didn't say much about her past but there was a story about her and my grandfather during the first world war before they were married in 1917. They lived near Lincoln. One day they were out together when a German zeppelin passed overhead, presumably on a bombing run over the engineering works. My grandfather took immediate action, pulled her into the nearest ditch and shielded her from the zeppelin. This seems to have

made a positive impression on my grandmother. Maybe I have a German zeppelin to thank for their marriage and my later existence.

My grandmother was a force of nature. When I was a young child my mother left me with her one day each week while she went shopping in Lincoln. That was a happy day of the week for me.

A little later, my grandparents moved to Peterborough. When we visited Peterborough we always went to see her cousin Auntie May whose husband owned a chain of Estate Agents. They lived in a mansion like in Agatha Christie novels or in the Cluedo board game. It even had a Billiard Room. Auntie May had a personal servant called Lucy.

Two examples of servanthood. Lucy was a servant in the old tradition of being in service. Neither Lucy nor Auntie May seemed happy and I didn't enjoy going there. My grandmother was a servant in the Christian sense. Besides her loving kindness to me and others, she gave her time to such as the women's network.

Being a servant. It conjures up pictures of Downton Abbey. How many of us would like to spend our life as a servant? Yet servanthood lies at the heart of what it is to be a Christian.

Many Methodist churches are following Bible Month on the book of Isaiah. An enduring theme of Isaiah is that of the Suffering Servant. In the time of Isaiah it probably referred to the people of Israel and their difficult history of exile and restoration. But the Suffering Servant had greater resonances and became a prophecy applied to Jesus the Messiah.

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus quotes directly from Isaiah chapter 42:

¹⁸"Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. ¹⁹He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. ²⁰A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. ²¹In his name the nations will put their hope."

This quote does not mention suffering. Its key words are love, delight, justice, victory and hope. Suffering may be the key word applied to Jesus as a servant, but Isaiah's servant figure is much more than that – and Jesus was much more than his suffering.

Servanthood was later at the heart of how the New Testament church saw itself. St Paul began his letters to Rome, Philippi and Titus by introducing himself as Paul, a servant of Christ. He further described himself as a servant of Christ in his letters to Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus and Colossae.

The centrality of servanthood is also clear in our reading from Acts chapter 4. It was not long after Pentecost. Peter and the apostles were proclaiming the resurrection. Peter caused a stir by healing a lame man. The religious authorities reacted by arresting Peter and John and putting them in prison overnight. Public knowledge of what had happened made it impossible for them to keep hold of Peter and John, so Peter and John were released with a warning to stop preaching the resurrection – a warning they ignored. The reading tells what happened when Peter and John were reunited with the other believers. Peter and John first recounted the events. Their next impulse was to pray to God as 'Sovereign Lord' thus acknowledging God as king, and by implication that they were his servants.

In the course of the prayer, they go on to call King David the servant of God. They twice called Jesus the 'holy servant' of God. They described themselves as the Lord's servants for speaking God's word with 'great boldness'. The result was that

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

This emphasis on servanthood has relevance for us. It affects how we see our relationship with God. Our attitude to God should be one of being God's servants.

There are two poles to our relationship with God – friendship and servanthood. On the one hand God loves us and cares for us to the extent of going to the cross and dying that we might live. God’s orientation to us is love and self-sacrifice. The complimentary orientation on our part to God’s love is gratitude, reciprocated love, and service.

These two poles are evident in Jesus’s teaching. On the one hand, in John chapter 15, Jesus said to the disciples, and therefore to us,

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends...

This is balanced by Luke chapter 17, where Jesus says,

So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’

The truth is that at the same time we are both friends loved by God and also God’s unworthy servants. Holding these together would appear to be a challenge. God in Jesus is our friend, and Jesus calls us ‘friend’, so we might think we have the expectation that God should do what we want and meet our needs. But God works to a larger agenda than what we consider to be our best interest. When things go wrong we have no right to demand, ‘Where is God in this?’ God is not our servant to command.

Some people, and maybe each of us at some time, instead focus on the fact that we are unworthy servants – and especially focus on the feeling of unworthiness. We can feel that we have done things that make us unforgivable and unloved by God. When we think like this we should remember that Jesus calls us friends, and that Jesus went to the cross because we are sinners, not because we are worthy and good.

The balance of being both friends and servants affects how we pray and approach God. Being friends, God welcomes us into his presence and welcomes our prayers for ourselves and others. On the other hand, being servants, our prayers should include space to hear what God is asking of us – and a willingness to place ourselves at God’s disposal to do as God wishes precisely because it is what God wishes – and without any other reason.

Many years ago I remember a bishop getting into trouble with the popular press for saying that he meditated rather than prayed. It depends what the bishop meant by meditation, but meditation usually means a conversation that goes on inside one’s own head. Prayer in contrast is a conversation between God and the one praying. A conversation is framed by the relationship between those in conversation. Jesus calls us friends so it is right that we should be open and chatty in our prayers. We are also servants of God, so prayer is God’s conversation with us before it is our conversation with God. God is the lead partner in prayer. Our prayer to God is Jesus through the Spirit praying in us. We acknowledge this every time we end a prayer by saying ‘in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.’ Prayer is what it is, and becomes easier, when we approach God as both friend and servant. As a way into prayer it can help to hold together those two thoughts: I am a friend of God; I am a servant of God.

To modern ears, combining friendship with servanthood sounds like combining something congenial with something distinctly uncongenial. Conventionally, what we want is more friendship and less servanthood. Friendship brings freedom and servanthood restricts freedom.

This is not how it is seen in prayers that go back a long way in history and come down to us, for example, in the collect for peace. I’m thinking of prayers containing the phrase ‘*whose service is perfect freedom*’. In the fourth century, St Augustine composed the prayer:

*Lord, you are the light of minds that know you, the joy of hearts that love you, and the strength of the souls that serve you. Help us to know you that we may truly love you; so to love you that we may fully serve you, **whose service is perfect freedom**. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

What is this service that is perfect freedom? The underlying thought is the same as in some other words of Augustine:

Our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.

Freedom is freedom to do something – what would we do given perfect freedom? Most people would say something along the lines that we should use our freedom to do whatever makes us happy.

When I formally retired two years ago I found that many people made the suggestion of going on a cruise. Apparently, this is what recently retired people do. Not for me - it doesn't appeal. I've chosen to carry on working part-time – even when I don't need to - because that is what I enjoy. This is a mystery to some people. We are all different and we have different ideas of how we should use the freedom of retirement. 'Do whatever makes you happy' is the mantra.

Fine – but what makes us happy - really happy I mean - beyond the momentary happiness that becomes history when the moment has passed? Augustine's point is that happiness in its deepest sense comes from serving God. 'Happiness' is a superficial word. A deeper word is 'beatitude' as taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. We discover beatitude when we serve God and align our lives with God's command to love God and love our neighbour.

Thus, being a friend of God and being God's servant are not opposites. They are the same thing. In serving God, our friendship with God deepens. As we draw closer in friendship to God we find that to serve God is to head towards perfect freedom and discover the rest that can only be found in God.

We can look around and ask who we have known that comes closest to God's freedom. I'm sure my grandmother was not perfect. Still, in my memory of her I see something worth aiming for. We will never get there in this life because we are intrinsically flawed, but we can head in the right direction. Being God's servant takes us deeper into the friendship God offers us in Jesus.

Hymn: StF781 Take oh take me as I am (sing through a few times)

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

Take, oh take me as I am ;
summon out what I shall be ;
set your seal upon my heart
and live in me.

John L. Bell (b. 1949)

Prayers

[Harold Macmillan was once asked what was most difficult about being Prime Minister. His reply was 'Events, dear boy, events'. The same might be said about writing prayers a week in advance of a service. You will probably need to adapt the following.]

Lord God, loving heavenly Father, we bring before you the needs of the world.

We pray for peace between nations. We pray for justice and stability – for governments that enact the will of the people and governments that care for the vulnerable. We pray for politicians who give their lives in service. Thank you for honesty and integrity where we see it.

We pray for Japan where Shinzo Abe was brutally murdered by an individual who escaped the notice of the bodyguards. Thank you for his long service as prime minister both to his nation and the wider world order.

Once again we hold before you the people and government of Ukraine in this testing time. Thank you for their courage. May President Putin see the harm he is doing and pull back from aggression. May the governments of the world work together to find a way to bring peace and justice. May they find a way of mitigating the rising fuel prices and the loss of food output from Ukraine so that people do not suffer – especially those who are already poor.

We pray for the United Kingdom in the present political instability. Thank you for the reassertion of values of integrity and justice. May politicians of all parties and convictions work together to sustain peace, justice and prosperity.

Lord, we also bring before you our local and personal concerns. You know what is on our minds. You know the people we care about. We hold them before you and ask your blessing on them.

We pray for churches across the circuit and their leaders as they commit themselves to serving you. We are your servants and offer ourselves to be guided in the spread of your gospel by word and action.

Thank you, Lord, for the joys of life – for the enjoyment of summer warmth – for holidays – for our families and friends. We thank you that all good things have their roots in you. You are the creator and sustainer of all things. In you all things will find their eventual home and rest in the promise of your kingdom.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, they 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, for ever and ever. Amen

Hymn: StF470 Lord for the years

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkTrFQLy6js>

<p>1 Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided, urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way, sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided, Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.</p> <p>2 Lord, for that word, the Word of life which fires us, speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze, teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us, Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.</p> <p>3 Lord, for our land, in this our generation, spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care ; for young and old, for commonwealth and nation, Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.</p>	<p>4 Lord, for our world ; when we disown and doubt him, loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain ; hungry and helpless, lost indeed without him, Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.</p> <p>5 Lord, for ourselves ; in living power remake us, self on the cross and Christ upon the throne ; past put behind us, for the future take us, Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.</p> <p>Timothy Dudley-Smith (<i>b.</i> 1926)</p>
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Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

And the blessing of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with us all, now and always