

## Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2022 - Order of service

Welcome to this time of worship, wherever you are!

### Call to worship

Come, let us sing to the Lord; let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before God's presence with thanksgiving. And raise a loud shout to the Lord with psalms.

### StF 340 - Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZ9j3e8\\_yQc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZ9j3e8_yQc)

<p>1 Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim, and publish abroad his wonderful name ; the name all-victorious of Jesus extol ; his kingdom is glorious, and rules over all.</p> <p>2 God ruleth on high, almighty to save ; and still he is nigh, his presence we have ; the great congregation his triumph shall sing, ascribing salvation to Jesus our King.</p>	<p>3 'Salvation to God who sits on the throne !' Let all cry aloud, and honour the Son ; the praises of Jesus the angels proclaim, fall down on their faces, and worship the Lamb.</p> <p>4 Then let us adore, and give him his right ; all glory and power, all wisdom and might, all honour and blessing, with angels above, and thanks never-ceasing, and infinite love.</p> <p>Charles Wesley (1707–1788)</p>
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### Prayer of adoration – from the Companion to the Revised Common Lectionary Vol. 10

The heavens proclaim your glory, Lord;  
creation resounds to your praise.  
Your law is perfect, reviving the soul;  
your decrees are sure, making wise the simple.  
You are our light and salvation,  
the strength of our lives.  
We come into your presence as guests invited by you  
and we offer you our worship.  
Blessing and honour and glory and power  
be yours for ever and ever. **Amen.**

### Prayers of confession – Methodist Worship Book

God of mercy,  
your love for us is strong,  
but our love for you is weak.  
You call us to follow Jesus, but we are slow to obey.  
You care for all that you have made,  
but we ignore the needs of others and misuse your creation.  
We are sorry for our sins.

### Silence

Forgive us,  
and help us to please you  
by the way we live;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

God is love  
and forgives our sins through Jesus. **Amen.**

### Introduction

Preachers who choose to use the appointed readings for the day are faced with at least 4 possible passages. There is always a psalm, an Old Testament reading, a New Testament passage from the letters;

and a reading from the gospels. Today we're going to hear three of today's set readings, and later, reflect on how they might *together* speak to us today.

We will hear a story of how the ancient scriptures were read to the people, and interpreted; a letter to the early church about what it means to belong to Christ together; and the account of Jesus in his home town, interpreting the scriptures for his neighbours.

### **Prayer before the readings**

Speak, God, to our listening;  
speak, God, to our thinking;  
speak to our soul's deep understanding.

### **Preface to the first reading**

Imagine we're in Jerusalem in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

It's fair to say that the place is a long way from its glory days prior to its destruction some 100 years before.

A governor named Nehemiah led the Hebrew people as they returned to Jerusalem.

They had been slaves in Babylon.

Even though they had come home to Jerusalem, they had to start all over again.

Buildings were destroyed from the war. They had to rebuild the Temple.

Then they had to build the walls of the city for protection from their enemies.

Now the people were sad and troubled.

They wanted to remember the good times from the past.

They wanted to be given hope about their future as God's people.

They were thirsty for a word from God.

The people asked Ezra, the scribe, to read to them from the Torah, the first five books of the scriptures.

So we hear the first reading, from the book of Nehemiah.

Listen now for the word of God.

### **Reading** - Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

<sup>5</sup>And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

<sup>8</sup>So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

### **Reading** - 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with

greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.  
Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

### **Prayer before the sermon**

As we look into the Word of God  
may we see the Son of God  
and be changed by the Spirit of God  
into the image of God  
for the glory of God.

### **Sermon Part 1**

It was a time of enormous challenge – rebuilding Jerusalem, literally and metaphorically, after years of suffering and destruction.

The people needed hope that a new future was beginning.

So the people called on Ezra, the scribe, to read to them from "the Torah of Moses, which YHWH had given to Israel".

The Torah of Moses (the first five books in our Bible) would have included the great stories of the past, the sagas of the patriarchs and matriarchs, the magnificent tales of Egypt, the defeat of the mighty pharaoh, and the exodus through the parted waters of the sea.

A special wooden platform was built out in the open air of the ruined city, and Ezra, the scribe, read to them **from sunrise to noon!** (And you think some of our services are too long?)

The passage emphasizes that this occasion includes not just the priests, Levites, or even just the men, but *all the people*, men and women.

As Ezra reads, thirteen assistants in two groups stand either side of him and "read with interpretation," "giving the sense," so that "the people understood the reading."

It seems that simply reading Torah is not enough; **we must have help in understanding it**, and great teachers on their own are not sufficient for that task. They need others to help.

The Bible has been misinterpreted, co-opted, corrupted, and greatly misused throughout history. Sadly, it continues today.

For example, in her recent book, *God is not a White Man*, Chine McDonald describes the disturbing ways in which the Bible, and therefore the Christian faith, has been misused over the centuries to promote white supremacy, and therefore racism.

It is essential that we learn how to understand the Bible, and interpret God's eternal truth for our time and place, so that we do not perpetuate complicity in injustice and evil.

The story of Ezra teaches us that **reading and understanding the Bible is a communal act, never an individualistic one only.**

To understand Scripture you need help, and you need community.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians, our second reading, speaks to this truth about the need for community as we try to understand scripture and interpret God's word for our situation and time. Using the vivid metaphor of a human body, he explains that we are the Body of Christ and individually members of it. For a body to function well, it needs all its varied parts to play their part. If, like me, you have parts of your body which are not working properly, you will not need reminding of how difficult that can make it to function well in daily life.

And so, writes Paul, the Body of Christ needs *every part* to be co-ordinated and working together, in order to function well.

You cannot be a solitary private Christian!

Belonging to Christ means to belonging to one another.

We all have a *different* part to play, but we all matter, we are all important.

That means that when it comes to our discipleship – growing in faith to become more like Jesus – we need each other.

Part of that belonging will mean understanding and interpreting the Bible *together*.

You are unlikely to grow as a Christian if you rely on your own understanding. Reading the Bible prayerfully in a small group is one of the best ways to grow in understanding of scripture.

In any congregation, everyone is important as we work out together what God is saying to us through scripture here and now.

This week is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, when around the world, millions of Christians of every denomination and nationality will be praying that we should grow closer to that one-ness for which Jesus prayed, the night before he went to his death. "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." (John 17: 11)

The worldwide Christian family is the Body of Christ, and has amazing diversity. Paul teaches us to value that diversity and variety. This must include the way we listen to each other as we read and interpret the Bible. We need to hear Christians from very different contexts and experiences as they interpret scripture. We need the perspectives of black & white, male and female, the poor, the persecuted, east and west, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. For too long, interpreting the Bible has been predominantly undertaken by western white men.

There is a choice for the next hymn:

### Hymn - StF 611 – Brother, sister, let me serve you

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfW9oQ-yiuU>

1	Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you ; pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.	4	I will weep when you are weeping ; when you laugh I'll laugh with you ; I will share your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through.
2	We are pilgrims on a journey, and companions on the road ; we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.	5	When we sing to God in heaven we shall find such harmony, born of all we've known together of Christ's love and agony.
3	I will hold the Christ-light for you in the night-time of your fear ; I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.	6	Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you ; pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.
Richard A. M. Gillard (b. 1953)			

### or StF 608 All praise to our redeeming Lord

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2Qhk8zl7Jo>

1	All praise to our redeeming Lord, who joins us by his grace, and bids us, each to each restored, together seek his face.	4	E'en now we think and speak the same, and cordially agree ; concentred all, through Jesu's name, in perfect harmony.
2	He bids us build each other up ; and, gathered into one, to our high calling's glorious hope we hand in hand go on.	5	We all partake the joy of one, the common peace we feel, a peace to sensual minds unknown, a joy unspeakable.
3	The gift which he on one bestows, we all delight to prove ; the grace through every vessel flows, in purest streams of love.	6	And if our fellowship below in Jesus be so sweet, what heights of rapture shall we know when round his throne we meet !
Charles Wesley (1707–1788)			

Before a final reflection, we hear the gospel reading for today.

### **Gospel reading      Luke 4:14-21**

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

### **Sermon Part 2**

I'm sure, like me, you are tired of hearing visionary promises by those aspiring to political leadership, whose actions rarely follow their words. Amazing and encouraging assurances are given about what will be achieved and who will benefit, but so often, the reality is very far from the promise.

This account of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth has sometimes been described as Jesus' manifesto. To put it in context, this incident occurs after his baptism and the time of temptation in wilderness, but *before* Jesus calls the twelve disciples.

In his home town, amongst the people who had known him all his life, Jesus stood up to read the appointed reading for the synagogue that day- a passage from the prophet Isaiah.

So here is another account of scripture being read aloud, but this time it is Jesus. When he finished reading and sat down, we can imagine that everyone expected him to expound on the text, or say a few words about the prophet. Instead, Jesus says,

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Can you imagine the audacity of that claim?

Jesus declares, "Today, right now, in your ears, in front of your eyes, this word has become flesh. Not in some abstract, generic, ethereal way, but in a concrete, fleshly, specific way. I am the One, I am the good news you have been waiting for."

Such audacity was too much for the hometown crowd and they tried to throw him over a cliff to shut him up.

One commentator observes: "It's not that every text isn't important in its own way, but this one is special. Surrounded as we are these days by the inflated and sometimes incendiary promises of political candidates – however lacking in specificity they may be—we might better compare this speech to the inspiring inaugural addresses of leaders in the public sphere: what gets said here today will be the plan, not just a promise, for the days ahead."

Drawing on the ancient text from Isaiah, Jesus sets out a vision of the Kingdom of God.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus did more than preach and tell stories.

He healed the sick, raised the dead and defended the poor and the powerless.

**He not only told the story - he was the story.**

When Jesus interpreted the scriptures, he did it with reference to himself.

Christians use the phrase 'Word of God' in several ways.

We refer to the written word of God – the Bible.

We may sometimes refer to spoken preaching and teaching as the word of God.

But supremely, we affirm that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh.

Today's passage began,

"Then Jesus returned to Galilee, and the power of the Holy Spirit was with him."

Jesus taught.

He was filled with God's Spirit.

He ushered in the new Kingdom.

This is so much bigger than the gospel we often proclaim.

There is a version of the gospel which says that Jesus came, so that each of us might invite him into our hearts.

There's nothing wrong with that, but that's such an inadequate, partial gospel.

*Jesus* didn't say that. He said:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

He brought Good News that has implications for each of us,  
for our church and our community,  
for our nation and for every nation in the world.

Jesus announced the fulfilment of the Scriptures *in* Himself.  
As his disciples, we are called to share in his manifesto, his mission.  
As we interpret God's written word, we listen to Jesus, the Word made flesh.  
We need the Holy Spirit to guide and inspire us.  
We need each other in the Body of Christ as we grow in discipleship.

May Jesus, the Word made flesh, empower us by His Spirit,  
to live and speak good news to the poor,  
release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind,  
freedom for the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. **Amen.**

**Prayers of intercession** from *Companion to the Revised Common Lectionary Vol. 10*

God of the living, of the present moment,  
your word contains truth for each new generation.  
We pray for fresh and exciting reminders  
of the power and glory of your sovereign love.

Speak to us again, living God,  
of your concern for justice for the poor and oppressed.  
Help us to announce your good news;  
    to proclaim your liberty to those held captive;  
    to work and pray for a better world.

This is our prayer: **Amen. Amen.**

Speak to us again, living God,  
of the ways in which you want us to live.  
Help us to share the hope we have in you;  
    to proclaim your love for every individual;  
    to work and pray for new life for humankind.

This is our prayer: **Amen. Amen.**

Speak to us again, living God,  
of our calling as members of Christ's body.  
In this week of prayer for Christian unity,  
help us to be united in love and respect for one another;  
    to proclaim your salvation to the world;  
    to work and pray under the guidance of your Spirit.

This is our prayer: **Amen. Amen.**

*Silence for your own prayers for family, friends, the Church, the world.*

We make our prayers in the name of your Son,  
Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh,  
who brought new life to old words  
and to old ways of living,  
who announced the good news of our salvation. Amen.

## The Lord's Prayer

### StF 404 - God's spirit is in my heart

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VTQvYG-bl4>

<p>1 God's spirit is in my heart ; he has called me and set me apart. This is what I have to do, what I have to do : <i>He sent me to give the good news to the poor, tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more, tell blind people that they can see, and set the down-trodden free, and go tell everyone the news that the kingdom of God has come, and go tell everyone the news that God's kingdom has come.</i></p> <p>2 Just as the Father sent me, so I'm sending you out to be my witness throughout the world — the whole of the world :</p>	<p>3 Don't carry a load in your pack ; you don't need two shirts on your back ; God's workers can earn their own keep — can earn their own keep :</p> <p>4 Don't worry what you have to say ; don't worry, because on that day God's spirit will speak in your heart — will speak in your heart :</p> <p>v. 1 and refrain Alan T. Dale (1902–1979) vv. 2-4 Hubert Richards (b. 1921)</p>
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### Blessing - God sends us out (Pat Bennett in 'Acorns & Archangels', publ. Wild Goose)

God sends us out into the world -

not to build walls

but to dismantle barriers.

Not to load on chains

but to liberate the oppressed.

Not to close our doors

but to welcome in the stranger.

Not to further fragment the body of Christ

but to re-imagine it.

God sends us out into the world

to live as a sign

of the justice and peace of his kingdom.