

Circuit service for October 9th 2022

Prepared by Jon Skeet

Welcome to worship, however you are worshipping. As we prepare for worship, may each of us take a moment to recognise that we are loved by God for who we are, just as we are.

In our first hymn, we are reminded to focus our worship on God. Wherever “here” is – God is here. Lord of all, we adore you – we believe!

Hymn: God is here! As we his people meet to offer praise and prayer (STF 25, HP 653)

1. God is here! As we his people
meet to offer praise and prayer,
may we find in fuller measure
what it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us,
all our varied skills and arts
wait the coming of the Spirit
into open minds and hearts.

2. Here are symbols to remind us
of our lifelong need of grace;
here are table, font, and pulpit;
here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
here in silence, as in speech,
here, in newness and renewal,
God the Spirit comes to each.

3. Here our children find a welcome
in the Shepherd's flock and fold,
here as bread and wine are taken,
Christ sustains us, as of old.
Here the servants of the Servant
seek in worship to explore
what it means in daily living
to believe and to adore.

4. Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,
in an age of change and doubt,
keep us faithful to the gospel,
help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication,
all we have to give, receive:
we, who cannot live without you,
we adore you! We believe!

Words by Fred Pratt Green. CCLI 2566496

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5akNpzEGrgs>

Prayers of adoration and confession

Lord God, we rejoice together and celebrate your glory. Nothing else is like you: you alone created the universe; you are the source of all life and all love. We gaze in wonder at your creation, and know you are at its heart, from stars and galaxies to subatomic particles. How could we ever take in the scale of your work and your love?

More astonishing yet, you know and care for each one of us. You came to earth as Jesus Christ to demonstrate that love for us on the cross, with the Resurrection proving the power of your love over death. We rejoice to live in you, and you in us – and offer ourselves in service, today and every day.

Just as we offer our lives in service, we know we aren't faithful to that promise. We fall far short of your perfect love, whether through deliberately hurting others, to walking past our neighbours without showing the compassion you call us to, or not even recognising where your love is needed. We are truly sorry for letting you down. We turn back to you and ask for your forgiveness, confident in receiving it through the promise of Jesus. We ask for your help in staying faithful to you, and to your vision for the Kingdom.

Hear and accept the words of grace: our sins are forgiven.

We join together in the Lord's Prayer.

Introduction to the theme

Our two readings from Scripture are from 2 Kings and Luke's Gospel – both involve people being healed of leprosy. You might expect this to be a service about healing – and that's an element, certainly. But the moment of physical healing isn't the important point in either story. Instead, it's about the "before and after" – how do the people involved approach the topic of healing? What do they do after they are healed? What is there to be healed beyond their leprosy? What are *our* "before and after" moments?

Our next hymn *starts* with a plea for healing, but quickly puts that healing in the context of love, which is at the heart of all our interactions with God.

Hymn: Lord, we come to ask your healing (STF 652)

1. Lord, we come to ask your healing,
teach us of love;

all unspoken shame revealing,
teach us of love.

Take our selfish thoughts and actions,
petty feuds, divisive factions,
hear us now to you appealing,
teach us of love.

2. Soothe away our pain and sorrow,
hold us in love;

grace we cannot buy or borrow,
hold us in love.

Though we see but dark and danger,
though we spurn both friend and stranger,
though we often dread tomorrow,
hold us in love.

3. When the bread is raised and broken,
fill us with love;

words of consecration spoken,
fill us with love.

As our grateful prayers continue,
make the faith that we have in you
more than just an empty token,
fill us with love.

4. Help us live for one another,
bind us in love;

stranger, neighbour, father, mother -
bind us in love.

All are equal at your table,
through your Spirit make us able
to embrace as sister, brother,
bind us in love.

Words by Jean Holloway. CCLI 3268559

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbbcjEsiwb8>

HP alternative: HP 395, O Christ, the Healer, we have come

Readings

2 Kings 5:1-15b

Luke 17:11-19

Prayer of thanksgiving

Gracious God,

Prompted by your Scripture, we are reminded of how much you have given to us, freely and generously. We give thanks to you now, aware that whatever we recognise there will always be more.

We thank you for your creation; for all life around us.

We thank you for each other; for all who are made in your image.

We thank you for Scripture and the faith of others who have helped us to see your love.

We thank you for your Spirit, stirring our hearts and working in our communities.

We thank you for Jesus – in ministry, in sacrifice, in resurrection.

All of these are bound up in your love, for which we give you thanks now and forever.

Amen.

Sermon

Approaching healing from different angles

Both readings are examples of God's love in action, and in each case one person came away with much more than they expected. While there are clear similarities, it's worth looking at the differences too.

Naaman was clearly important. He was an army commander, known personally to the king of Aram, and apparently rich – the sums of money described in 2 Kings are pretty significant. Just in terms of the ten talents of silver, King Omri is recorded to have bought the hill of Samaria in 1 Kings for *two* talents of silver.

Compare him with the ten men with leprosy in Luke's Gospel: they had to stand at a distance from Jesus, presumably ostracised by their community as required by the rules in Leviticus. The fact that one of them turned out to be a Samaritan shows how far they'd have fallen in status – normally the Jews would have had nothing to do with the Samaritans. (There's perhaps a whole other sermon on the way that shared adversity can help us see common humanity that is normally obscured by artificial differences.)

Perhaps it is that difference in status that gives the men in Luke the better insight into how they might be cured. They call out "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" They recognise that

healing must come from Jesus, and that they have nothing material to offer to pay for that healing. Naaman, on the other hand, clearly wants to *buy* a cure. Also, the letter from the king of Aram to the king of Israel says nothing about pity, or recognising a higher power – it just states “I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy.” The letter is effectively transactional. The king of Israel interprets it that way too, and again has no sense of God’s will in action. He knows he cannot cure Naaman directly, and assumes this must be a political ploy.

We aren’t told much about how the ten men in Luke’s Gospel were healed – it sounds like they *just* needed to go to the priests. That invites all kinds of speculation about the point at which they were healed, and any scepticism they may have had along the way. Did they all have faith, or did some have to be encouraged by the others? We simply don’t know.

But we have a lot more detail about the journey Naaman took for his cure. When told that he has to wash himself seven times in the Jordan, he is initially angry. Why wasn’t he just cured on the spot, by Elisha? That was his expectation. Instead, he has to make do with a messenger passing on instructions from Elisha. The idea of the Jordan in particular – a muddy river, compared with the rivers of his homeland – made him even angrier. There are multiple interpretations here, all of which may have some truth to them. Perhaps the physical dirtiness of the Jordan was intended to make it clear to Naaman that his cure would be supernatural rather than a matter of hygiene. Perhaps it was intended to establish a link between his cure and the people of Israel, who had also passed through the Jordan. Either way, Naaman has to swallow his pride and obey God’s instructions – which he eventually does, with miraculous results.

Responding to God’s love

So, in both narratives, everyone is cured. Naaman’s skin becomes “like that of a young boy” and the implication in Luke’s Gospel is that all of the ten men suffering from leprosy are cured.

That’s not the end of either story though – nor is it the end of the restoration for everyone involved. Two people – Naaman and the Samaritan man – recognise God’s love at work, and celebrate it. Reading further in 2 Kings, Elijah sees the transformation of heart in Naaman, and tells him to “Go in peace.” Likewise, Jesus tells the Samaritan to “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

It's easy to read “your faith has made you well” in connection with the curing of leprosy, but my take on this is that in both cases, an extra kind of blessing was involved, that was much more than skin-deep. Naaman has new-found faith and peace, and I’d like to think that the blessing of Jesus for the Samaritan to be “well” is about his whole person – body, mind and soul.

We don't know anything about what happened to the other nine men who were cured in Luke's Gospel. Maybe some returned praising God, just not to Jesus. Maybe some regarded the cure as a form of magic with no deeper meaning. All that I think we *can* infer is that they would have been better off returning to Jesus first.

Anticipating and responding to God's love

So what have these events from thousands of years ago, hundreds of years apart, have to do with us in the 21st century? To me, it has nothing to do with physical healing. It's about approaching God with a mixer of humility and faithful expectation – and thankful recognition.

We know we need healing, and that we are called to be *part* of healing in the world. We know that God is the source of all power and love – and that we must put God at the centre of our lives. We must listen for God's call, ready to faithfully obey it. We don't try to *buy* God's favour with gold and silver, but we still need to be ready to give all we have in God's service. Sometimes the call may be as simple as the ten men showing themselves to the priests. Sometimes it may be as mysterious as washing seven times in the Jordan. And when God's love has been shown to us or through us, we must give thanks to God, recognising God's generosity and blessing. It can be too easy to congratulate *ourselves* for God's work within us through the Spirit, or to take it entirely for granted. The more we notice the blessings we are around and part of, the more likely we are to hear God's *next* call – and the more the blessings will resonate through the rest of our lives, like the "wellness" of the Samaritan who returned to Jesus.

Conclusion

The healings in the readings are neat little parcels, night and day changes from disease to cure. God's work and love shown to us, through us and in us are likely to be much more messy, long-running journeys in our complex lives. That can make it harder to see God's hand at work, and thank God for the grace shown to us.

But however difficult, we must look to God for direction and guidance. We should not be like Naaman was to start with, expecting a magic trick – but we *can* expect to see the miracle of God's Kingdom on earth, and have faith that our call is part of building that Kingdom.

How will you actively listen for God's call in your life? How will you give thanks for the grace shown to you?

Amen.

As we approach our prayers of intercession, we reflect on God as the source of healing of all kinds in our next hymn.

Hymn: For the healing of the nations (STF 696, HP 402)

1. For the healing of the nations,
Lord, we pray with one accord;
for a just and equal sharing
of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action
help us rise and pledge our word.

2. Lead us forward into freedom;
from despair your world release,
that, redeemed from war and hatred,
all may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness
fear will die and hope increase.

3. All that kills abundant living,
let it from the earth be banned;
pride of status, race, or schooling,
dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice
may we hallow life's brief span.

4. You, Creator-God, have written
your great name on humankind;
for our growing in your likeness
bring the life of Christ to mind;
that by our response and service
earth its destiny may find.

Words by Fred Kaan. CCLI 3200067

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dc-2tiAfSyY>

Prayers of intercession

Lord, we lift before you our concerns for your world.

We pray for your Church, locally and throughout the world. May this Church truly be the body of Christ on earth, showing your compassion and love to all, and spreading the Good News of your triumph over death. We pray particularly for those who are accepting that Good News for the first time, taking their first steps into faith. May they be surrounded by support and wisdom.

We pray for the nations of the world, particularly communities suffering through natural disasters, war, poverty, oppression and corruption. We pray especially for Pakistan, still recovering from the floods of September, and Ukraine. May we see the world through your eyes, and respond with your love.

We pray for the leaders of the world, who are able to change so much with so few words and actions. May they be humble in their exercise of power, and may they listen to your will.

We pray for your creation, and all those who are working to defend and restore it. May we all feel the duty of stewardship to the planet we share, mindful of our own impact on both climate change and biodiversity.

We pray for our local communities, for those known to us and those with needs we're unaware of, right on our doorstep. We think of those who are ill, and those caring for them. For those who have died, and their families and friends who mourn for them. For those facing a hard winter financially, making impossible decisions. Grant comfort and strength to all those in need, and may we show your love without reserve.

To all these prayers we add the silent longings in our hearts, eager to see your Kingdom on earth. All this we ask in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Our final hymn is in the Advent section of Singing the Faith, and in "Christ's Coming in Glory" in Hymns and Psalms. No, we're not in Advent yet – and today's service hasn't been about the second coming. But this is a hymn of expectation and recognition. It acknowledges the majesty of God, the value of prayer, our role in God's Kingdom here on earth – and the triumph of God's love.

Hymn: There's a light upon the mountains (STF 188, HP246)

1. There's a light upon the mountains,
and the day is at the spring,
when our eyes shall see the beauty
and the glory of the King;
weary was our heart with waiting,
and the night-watch seemed so long;
but his triumph-day is breaking,
and we hail it with a song.

2. There's a hush of expectation,
and a quiet in the air;
and the breath of God is moving
in the fervent breath of prayer:
for the suffering, dying Jesus
is the Christ upon the throne,
and the travail of our spirit
is the travail of his own.

3. He is breaking down the barriers,
he is casting up the way;
he is calling for his angels
to build up the gates of day:
but his angels here are human,
not the shining hosts above;
for the drum-beats of his army
are the heart-beats of our love.

4. Hark! We hear a distant music,
and it comes with fuller swell;
'tis the triumph-song of Jesus,
of our King, Immanuel:
Zion, go now forth to meet him;
and, my soul, be swift to bring
all your finest and your noblest
for the triumph of our King!

Words by Henry Burton. CCLI 2846240

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOCqAlA9m04>

Blessing

May the Lord bless us with healing of body, mind, spirit, and relationships – and give us thankful hearts to recognise and celebrate God's work in our lives. Amen.