

Circuit service for January 30th 2022

Prepared by Jon Skeet

Welcome to worship. Wherever you are, whoever you are, your presence enriches our worship together, as we come together to glorify God. We come with praise on our lips; we come with ears ready to hear God's voice afresh; we come with hearts ready to serve.

Our first hymn may come as a bit of a surprise if you think of it as just being for Christmas... but it's a hymn of peace; of listening to the song of the angels announcing Christ's birth *and everlasting kingdom*. In today's worship we'll be thinking about discord in the world, so it's worth acknowledging the "two thousand years of wrong" in the third verse, as we think of the part we each have to play in God's kingdom of peace and unity.

Hymn: It came upon the midnight clear

Singing the Faith 205, Hymns and Psalms 108; CCLI 31078

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_Dzovu1XA

(Words as per Singing the Faith; the YouTube video has a different final verse.)

1. It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth
to touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good will to men,
from heaven's all-gracious King!"
The world in solemn stillness lay
to hear the angels sing.
2. Still through the cloven skies they come,
with peaceful wings unfurled,
and still their heavenly music floats
o'er all the weary world;
above its sad and lowly plains
they bend on hovering wing;
and ever o'er its Babel-sounds
the blessed angels sing.
3. Yet with the woes of sin and strife
the world has suffered long;
beneath the angel strain have rolled
two thousand years of wrong;
and man, at war with man, hears not
the love-song which they bring.
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
and hear the angels sing!
4. For lo, the days are hastening on,
to prophets shown of old,
when with the ever-circling years
shall come the time foretold,
when the new heaven and earth shall own,
the Prince of Peace their King,
and all the world repeat the song
which now the angels sing.

Prayers of adoration and confession

Let us pray.

Lord God, we come before you humbled by your glory. We look around at the beauty of your creation, and we marvel at it. Every star, mountain, tree, animal is made in your loving care. You are in each ripple on the surface of a pond, and in the unthinkable forces of a black hole. As we imagine all you have made, we remember that you made us, too – you know each of us by name, and love each one of us.

As the peoples of the world cry out in joy, grief, anger and pain, you alone hear us all. You know us better than we know ourselves; our capacity to reflect your love into the world, and how frequently we neglect to do so. And so as we rejoice at your presence in our world as creator, Saviour in Jesus and Sustainer in the Spirit, we acknowledge our weaknesses.

We have not followed you in the path you have shown us.

We have not loved you with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength.

We have not loved our neighbour as ourselves.

Sometimes we have been too busy to hear your call; sometimes we have pretended not to hear it. Sometimes we have hurt others deliberately; sometimes we have not taken the opportunity to be the hands of your love in the world.

For all of these times, we are sorry. We turn to you in repentance and ask your forgiveness, confident in the grace promised by Jesus.

We say together 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,

for ever and ever.

Amen.

Our first reading is the calling of Jeremiah. As you listen, put yourself in the place of Jeremiah. Hear that call as if it were coming to you right now – how would you feel?

Reading: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Hymn: Hear the call of the kingdom

Singing the Faith 407; CCLI 4930752

Alternative: Go forth and tell! – Hymns and Psalms 770; CCLI 168329

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OdlpJZVs0A>

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| 1. Hear the call of the kingdom,
lift your eyes to the King;
let his song rise within you
as a fragrant offering
of how God, rich in mercy,
came in Christ to redeem
all who trust in his unfailing grace. | <i>King of heaven, we will answer the call.
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
filled with passion,
filled with power to proclaim
salvation in Jesus' name.</i> |
| 2. Hear the call of the kingdom
to be children of light
with the mercy of heaven,
the humility of Christ;
walking justly before him,
loving all that is right,
that the life of Christ may shine through us. | 3. Hear the call of the kingdom
to reach out to the lost
with the Father's compassion
in the wonder of the cross,
bringing peace and forgiveness,
and a hope yet to come:
let the nations put their trust in him. |
| | <i>Chorus</i> |

Called to... what exactly?

God says rather a lot to Jeremiah in a short space – and I think I'd pretty nervous if I were Jeremiah. Some of that is just because of the task given to him: being appointed as "a prophet to the nations" sounds like a big job. But it's the part at the end that would really make me worried: "I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and plant." I don't want to do any uprooting, tearing down, destroying or overthrowing! But that's what we're told God called Jeremiah to do – along with building and planting, of course.

That's worrying, but God reassures Jeremiah in two different ways. Firstly, there's the assurance that God will be with Jeremiah, protecting him: "I am with you and will rescue you." Secondly, God makes it clear that it's not Jeremiah's words and views that are important: God touches Jeremiah and says "See, I have put my words in your mouth."

Both of these are important to us today in *our* calling. Sometimes the words we receive from God may not be popular. There are many variations of the quote calling us to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" – but it's one I keep coming back to, particularly in the light of the climate crisis. We cannot afford to stay silent just because the

message is difficult to hear... but equally, we must make sure that the words we speak are really those of God, including God's love for *all* people. When we listen for God's voice in our hearts, it can be too easy to hear words of judgement, but not those of compassion – including for people we're challenging to make a change in the world.

Let us pray.

Lord, we ask you to give us your words in our mouths, and your courage in our hearts. May we be bold in proclaiming your will, and attentive so that we speak your words of love, however challenging they may be. Amen.

(End of video recording.)

Our Gospel reading provides an example of Jesus proclaiming a difficult message for his listeners.

Reading: Luke 4:21-30

Hymn: We have a gospel to proclaim

Singing the Faith 418, Hymns and Psalms 465; CCLI 279469

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5wWRYq57EM>

1. We have a gospel to proclaim,
good news for all throughout the earth;
the gospel of a Saviour's name:
we sing his glory, tell his worth.
2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem –
not in a royal house or hall,
but in a stable dark and dim,
the Word made flesh, a light for all.
3. Tell of his death at Calvary,
hated by those he came to save;
in lonely suffering on the cross:
for all he loved, his life he gave.
4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn,
empty the tomb, for he was free;
He broke the power of death and hell
that we might share his victory.
5. Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
by all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his Church
to live for him, the Lamb who died.
6. Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel-message we proclaim:
we sing his glory, tell his worth.

Sermon

Jesus in his home town

The lectionary does something a little odd this week. Often the lectionary continues from one week to another, picking up where it left off. This week, it picks up *slightly before*. We heard verse 21 at the end of last week's reading, and this week starts with verse 21. This is the verse:

He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

"This scripture" is from Isaiah 61, starting with "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." Jesus is saying "Isaiah was writing about me." That's a pretty bold statement – which actually makes the next couple of verses more surprising to me. We come away from the reading with the impression of an angry crowd, but for a couple of verses, they're impressed: "all spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips." They sound pretty – well, *comfortable*.

Jesus could have left it there. He could have played up to the adulation, and we might never have heard about this whole episode. But Jesus turned the situation round – seemingly without provocation. We don't hear about the other members of the synagogue actually challenging him for miracles, but Jesus puts that challenge on their lips: "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'" My NIV study Bible is oddly silent about why Jesus said this. He continued to give examples from the Old Testament where Israel didn't seem to be favoured as much as might have been expected – usually in response to rejecting God's messengers.

This reminds me of a passage in Matthew 21: Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

Perhaps Jesus thought the synagogue attendees were *too* comfortable. Perhaps he thought they were hearing that passage from Isaiah in too limited a way, as if it would apply only to Israel. Here, my study Bible *does* have a note: "Jesus' point was that when Israel rejected God's messenger of redemption, God sent him to the Gentiles – and so it will be again if they refuse to accept Jesus." But is that actually what we believe? Was Jesus only Good News for the Gentiles because he was rejected by the Jews? I believe the preaching of Jesus was so revolutionary because it was an expansion of the earlier interpretation – that Isaiah's prophecy is good news for *all*. It doesn't need to be either/or, Jew or Gentile.

Regardless of the nuance, Jesus certainly riles up the synagogue – they try to kill him. But just as God promised to rescue Jeremiah, so Jesus walks through the angry mob.

God's truth: hard to speak, and hard to hear

As always, we are called to see Scripture through the lens of our own lives – and to see our own lives through the lens of Scripture. So where do we put ourselves in today's Bible passage? Do we step into the shoes of Jesus, or into the crowd?

It's all too easy to look down on those at the synagogue – but maybe we should try to take on their perspective, too. Their comfortable faith was being questioned, poked at, challenged. Do we have experience of that in our lives? How do we normally react? Do we balance the urge to defend our values with the need to keep an open mind and be compassionate? Hopefully none of us has reacted violently like those who wanted to throw Jesus down a cliff, but I suspect there's still room for more grace in how we handle confrontations.

When it comes to the actions of Jesus, this balance becomes even more difficult. I'm certainly not about to criticise Jesus here, but I'd say the way he challenges his audience may not be one that it's appropriate for us to emulate. Don't get me wrong: I absolutely believe we are called to be challenging, to heed God's call to stand for justice, proclaim the Good News, and be bold in any number of other stances that may not be crowd-pleasers. But in doing so, we can recognise God's love for those we are challenging. Just as Jesus explained that God's love covers more than just the nation of Israel, so we need to be humble enough to avoid thinking of ourselves as "more special" than those we disagree with.

We see – and are part of – tribalism in so many aspects of life in the 21st century. In "For the healing of the nations", Fred Kaan writes of "pride of status, race or schooling" – and we can sure add politics, nation, religion and much more to that. Putting that aside is hard. Really hard. The urge to just leave that final perfect passive-aggressive put-down is so strong... and that's why we need God's help to counter it.

I keep coming back to the word "grace". When the whole UK Methodist Connexion was discussing the God In Love Unites Us Report, with many deeply held convictions at odds with each other, we were urged to seek *grace-filled* conversations. It is grace that allows us to catch glimpses of God in moments of disagreement, and to see each other more clearly as God's children, bearing God's image.

It's easy to be aggressive, to assert the supremacy of our own views over those we are talking to. It's also easy to back down – to never stand up for what we believe is right, or to follow God's call to transform the world according to Kingdom values. The narrow path of confidently proclaiming God's word, but with compassion and understanding for those we are talking with – that's much, much harder, but it's what I believe we are really called to.

I'll conclude with three questions, from the final verse of "Have you heard God's voice" by Jacqueline Jones:

- Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith, and believe it could be different?

- Will you share your views using words of grace?
- Will you leave a thoughtful imprint?

May God help us answer “yes” to all of these.

Amen.

(End of video recording.)

As we come to our prayers of intercession, we call Jesus to mind, listening to God’s voice that we might approach the world with eyes of love, compassion and justice.

Hymn: Jesus Christ is waiting

Singing the Faith 251; CCLI 996498

Alternative: It is God who holds the nations – Hymns and Psalms 404; CCLI 5404854

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wqwzlel4-5E>

1. Jesus Christ is waiting, waiting in the streets;
no-one is his neighbour, all alone he eats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I am lonely too:
make me, friend or stranger, fit to wait on you.
2. Jesus Christ is raging, raging in the streets,
where injustice spirals and real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I am angry too:
in the Kingdom’s causes let me rage with you.
3. Jesus Christ is healing, healing in the streets;
curing those who suffer, touching those he greets.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I have pity too:
let my care be active, healing just like you.
4. Jesus Christ is dancing, dancing in the streets,
where each sign of hatred he, with love, defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I should triumph too:
where good conquers evil let me dance with you.
5. Jesus Christ is calling, calling in the streets,
“Who will join my journey? I will guide their feet.”
Listen, Lord Jesus, let my fears be few:
walk one step before me; I will follow you.

Prayers of intercession

Let us lift our concerns before God.

Lord, we pray for your church. We ask for your Spirit to work within the church today. May we feel stirred to action, excited and energized by your call. May we be true to that call, putting your Kingdom above our comfort and pride, and may we exercise a ministry of grace.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

Lord, we pray for your creation. Help us all to see the beauty and fragility of the world around us, that we may work together to protect our environment, regardless of nation, politics or religion. We pray for the continuing work of COP 26, and we recognise the part each of us has to play in our own lives and in our communities.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

Lord, we pray for the people of the world. We particularly think of the people of Tonga, continuing to face desperately hard conditions following the volcano and tsunami there. We ask your strength on all those working to restore communities. We pray for all those facing poverty, injustice, violence, war – anything that goes against your will. We remember the lives lost to coronavirus, and everyone affected by it in other ways – through loss of social contact, economic hardship, and other impacts we may not even see for years to come.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

Lord, we pray for the leaders of the world. In difficult situations of international diplomacy, battles against coronavirus, competing needs for economic aid and much more, we pray that our leaders, and those of other nations, will show your wisdom and integrity.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

Lord, we pray for those we know in our community. For those who have died, and those who mourn. The ill and those who care for them. For all looking rising energy and food costs, and wondering how they will cope. We take a moment of silence to bring our own concerns before our loving God.

Lord, in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

All of these prayers we ask in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

In our final hymn, we are told of how vast God's love is – beyond our understanding. It is both Good News and a cautionary reminder that we are called to show that same love to others, beyond our pride and our prejudices.

Hymn: There's a wideness in God's mercy

Singing the Faith 416, Hymns and Psalms 230; CCLI 675458

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jq6NdOsCdOU> (no lyrics; only v1, 4, 5, 6)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jUSIe4WVmg> (tune: Corvedale)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgJObZLOJXk> (organ only, with lyrics on screen)

1. There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.
2. There is plentiful redemption
through the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the Head.
3. There is grace enough for thousands
of new worlds as great as this;
there is room for fresh creations
in that upper home of bliss.
4. For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
5. But we make his love too narrow
by false limits of our own;
and we magnify his strictness
with a zeal he will not own.
6. If our love were but more simple,
we should take him at his word;
and our lives would be illumined
by the glory of the Lord.

Blessing

May we each hear and respond to God's call in our lives, unafraid to challenge the ways of the world, but ready to do so with God's grace and love. We go out with that calling, not in our own strength but in the strength of God, who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to God's power that is at work within us.

May the blessing of God the Creator, God the Redeemer and God the Sustainer be with us all: today, tomorrow and evermore.

Amen.