

Cheshire South Methodist Circuit
Worship at Home - Sunday 28th April 2024



Call to Worship

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; **his steadfast love endures for ever!**

Open to me the gates of righteousness that **I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord**
From Psalm 118, v1 and 19

StF no. 443 Come, let us sing of a wonderful love

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| 1 Come let us sing of a wonderful love
tender and true;
out of the heart of the Father above,
streaming to me and to you;
wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above. | 3 Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;
why do they roam?
Love only waits to forgive and forget;
home, weary wanderer, home!
wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above. |
| 2 Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell
joyfully came;
came with the helpless and hopeless to
dwell
sharing their sorrow and shame;
seeking the lost
saving, redeeming at measureless cost. | 4 Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love
come and abide
lifting my life, till it rises above
envy and falsehood and pride;
seeking to be
lowly and humble, a learner of thee. |

Robert Walmsley (1831-1905)

Prayer of Thanksgiving

God of steadfast love, we praise you for your love poured out in Creation, in the glorious diversity of creatures, in the splendour of the heavens and the fertility of the earth.

We praise you for your love poured out in Jesus, in healing and teaching, in signs and wonders, in his humility and obedience, in his death and rising again.

We praise you for your love poured out in the Spirit, inspiring and guiding, giving words and understanding, building community and renewing faith.

We praise you for your love poured out on us, God our creator, redeemer and spirit. In this time of worship, may we abide in your love and share that love with those around us.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Prayer of confession

Loving God, we confess that there are areas in our lives we would rather you did not see: the blighted patches that we hardly notice, the twisted thoughts that we have learnt to live with, the fruitless stems of half-forgotten dreams. In your mercy, prune us of our dead, diseased and damaged wood; cut back our selfish growth, cleanse us of unnecessary baggage. Heal our wounds, and train our new shoots into shape, so that we may grow again in health and strength and bear much fruit. We pray in the name of Jesus, Amen

Words of Assurance (Psalm 118)

The Lord is our strength and might. Jesus is our salvation.

In Jesus our sins are forgiven.

In Jesus our cries are answered, our salvation is at hand.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. Amen

Prayer for illumination

May the light of scripture open our eyes, may the words of scripture stir in our hearts, and may the truth of scripture fill our lives. Amen

New Testament Reading: John 15: verses 1 - 8

¹"I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit. ³You have been made clean already by the teaching I have given you. ⁴Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵"I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. ⁶Whoever does not remain in me is thrown out like a branch and dries up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burnt. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, then you will ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it. ⁸My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples.

Message

This well-known text reminded me of a story I read about a missionary in Africa, who lived in the central mission which had a small generator to supply a current of electricity for his church and small rectory. Some natives from an outlying mission came to visit the missionary. They noticed the electric light hanging from the ceiling of his living room. They watched wide-eyed as he turned the little light switch and the light went on. One of the visitors asked if he could have one of the bulbs. The missionary, thinking he wanted it for a sort of trinket, gave him an extra bulb. Later that month the missionary went to visit the outlying mission, and the missionary stopped at the hut of the man who had asked for the bulb. Imagine his surprise when he saw the bulb hanging from the ceiling attached to an ordinary piece of string. He had to explain that electricity needed to be transmitted through a cable to bring the current to the bulb in order for it to light up.

In our text for today, Jesus told a story about the importance of just such connections to the source of power. Jesus' analogy uses the imagery of the vine and the branches. Just as the electricity provides the power necessary for the bulb to light up, so the vine provides the life necessary for the branches to produce fruit. Jesus is the vine, God the Father is the vine grower, and the true believers are the branches. Jesus wanted us to know that as branches we are alive; and that we can grow only if we are connected to him, the true vine. As long as we are connected to Jesus the power of the Holy Spirit can run into us and keep us alive and thriving. If we are cut off from Jesus, we spiritually wither and die. For verse two says, "Every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit, he takes away."

My experience of pruning comes from growing tomato plants. A friend explained to me the importance of removing suckers. You will probably know that a sucker is a branch that usually grows in the fork of the main trunk and the fruit-producing branch. According to my friend, the new branch will not produce fruit if the sucker remains. It will only sap the resources from the fruit-producing branch. So, to have a better crop, I was instructed to remove the suckers and it worked, I got lots of lovely tomatoes. We prune so the plant may be more fruitful.

I have several plants in my home, and if I do not pay attention to them, they very quickly droop! When I notice this, I very quickly give them water and more light, and within a very short period of time they look happy again.

I think it is fair to say that like our plants we can spiritually wither from time to time. Most Christians will recognise highs and lows in their journey of faith.

This could be for many reasons, we may allow our relationship with Jesus to grow weary and faded, or like our plants, we forget to get the kind of nutrition that we need to stay fresh and vital. Our spiritual energy can wither. Like drooping plants our relationship with Christ that was once so vibrant and fresh and exciting can become tired. The truth of the matter is that as human beings, it's easy to get disconnected from the vine. It's easy to let the ways of the world get of us and drain our obedience and the fruit that obedience to Jesus produces.

This is why Jesus says in John 15: 4 "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." If your relationship with Christ is to be fresh, if it is to be vibrant and exciting, it must remain connected to Him. Otherwise, we become like a branch that cannot produce fruit any longer and that branch is thrown into the fire. Every year Palestinian grape growers prune their vines. They cut off the dead wood that has no life in it and trim the living branches so that the yield will be greater. The people who first heard Jesus tell this story knew exactly what he was talking about. Jesus says in verse 6, "If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."

Fruitfulness is the result of the Son's life being reproduced in a disciple. A disciple needs to be continually connected to Jesus if they intend to be the kind of strong fruit-bearing vine Jesus is looking for. It's true that some habits are good and equally true that some habits are bad. For example it is a good habit when you have a regular devotional time with God. But ask yourself why do you have devotional time with God – Do you meet with God out of habit or out of love? Do you come to church out of habit? Do you say Amen out of habit? If we start to do things out of habit then we start to grow distant from God.

No one can follow Jesus on his or her own terms. Jesus defined through his preaching, teaching and personal example what we need to do if we want to be his disciples. In a similar fashion, I think God prunes our lives to shape us into the image of Jesus Christ. Sometimes the pruning involves removing sin from our lives. And sometimes God's pruning is painful, but over time God is changing us to look more like Jesus.

To close listen to these words from Hebrews 6: v 7 - 8, "When the ground soaks up the rain that falls on it and bears a good crop for the farmer, it has the blessing of God. But if a field bears thistles and thorns, it is useless. The farmer will condemn that field and burn it." Are you drinking in the rain that God is showering on you and are you enjoying the blessings that God has given you? Are you enjoying the blessings that have provided you with a meaningful and exciting relationship with Christ? Or are you like a thirsty plant that is withering because you are just too comfortable and have forgotten who's providing the rain?

Jesus is able to provide all you need to help you remain a healthy and productive part of the vine. God will be with us, now and always, to provide every grace we need for a full and abundant life. That's the promise. All God asks in return is that we abide in him, and that we live and work together in the unity of his Spirit.

From time to time we're tempted to go off on a tangent and do our own thing. We don't get much accomplished when we do. Only as we work together in accordance with God's will can we reach our potential and live faithfully as disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus said,

“I am the vine. You are the branches.
He who remains in me, and I in him, the same bears much fruit,
for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Brothers and sisters, this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of intercession

God who hears the cries of the poor, we pray for a world where everyone has enough to eat, a safe place to live, access to education and healthcare, and dignity and respect for who they are. Give us the courage to challenge the structures of inequality, and to speak for those whose voices are silence.

Lord in your mercy – **Hear our prayer**

God whose word is to be preached to all nations, we pray for evangelists, teachers and preachers, for those reaching people in new ways and places, for those who take risks for the sake of the gospel.

Inspire and uphold them, so that all they do is rooted in your love.

Lord in your mercy - **Hear our prayer**

God who plants, tends and prunes, we pray for farmers and growers, that they may balance the drive to maximise crops with care for the long-term health of the earth.

Lord in your mercy – **Hear our prayer**

God who commands us to love one another, help us to abide in your love, and deepen ours, so that we may make this church a safe and welcoming place for all who are here, and all who are yet to come.

Lord in your mercy – **Hear our prayer**

God who cares for each one of us, we hold before you the people we know who are suffering in body, mind or spirit – *(in a moment of silence lift those known to you before our Heavenly Father)*

Bring your comfort and healing to them and to those who care for them.

We bring all these prayers in the name of Jesus, who taught us when we pray to say

Our Father, who art in heaven ...

StF no 254 Seek ye first the kingdom of God

¹ Seek ye first the kingdom of God
and his righteousness;
and all these things shall be added unto you,
Allelu-, alleluia

Chorus

*Alleluia, alleluia,
Alleluia, allelu, alleluia*

³ We shall not live by bread alone
but by every word
that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord;
Allelu-, alleluia
Chorus...

Karen Lafferty b 1948

² Ask, and it shall be given unto you
seek and ye shall find;
Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you
Allelu-, alleluia

A prayer of blessing

May the love of God flow around us, among us and through us, and may the blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer and Spirit, be with us all, today and always.

(This act of worship was prepared by Jenny Smith)