

ORDER OF SERVICE FOR SUNDAY MORNING

21 FEBRUARY 2021

Welcome and Introduction

Call to Worship

Hymn Thou hidden love of God CH4 188

Thou hidden love of God, whose height,
Whose depth unfathomed no man knows,
I see from far Thy beauteous light,
Inly I sigh for Thy repose;
My heart is pained, nor can it be
At rest, till it finds rest in Thee.

Thy secret voice invites me still
The sweetness of Thy yoke to prove;
And fain I would: but though my will
Seems fixed, yet wide my passions rove;
Yet hindrances strew all the way;
I aim at Thee, yet from Thee stray.

'Tis mercy all, that Thou hast brought
My mind to seek her peace in Thee;
Yet, while I seek but find Thee not,
No peace my wand'ring soul shall see.
Oh, when shall all my wand'rings end,
And all my steps to Thee-ward tend!

Is there a thing beneath the sun
That strives with Thee my heart to share?
Ah! tear it thence, and reign alone,
The Lord of every motion there.
Then shall my heart from earth be free,
When it has found repose in Thee.

Gerhard Tersteegen (1697–1769)

translated John Wesley (1703–1791)

Prayers and Lord's Prayer

Gracious and loving God, you are always the God who seeks us. You are the God who gave His only Son, to show how much you desire each one of us to be close to you. The love of Jesus convinces us that you seriously want to draw us into the deepest of friendships with you. You are the God who calls each one of

us by name. We praise and worship you for your infinite patience, your care and concern for every aspect of our lives, and your wonderful grace and mercy towards us, when we have forgotten or offended you.

Lord, forgive us for those times when we got on with our lives as though you didn't exist. We were so focussed on living that we forgot that you are the giver and sustainer of life. Thank you that when we realised our neglect of you, you still held out your open arms to welcome us home.

Glorious God, we praise you that Jesus is alive. Death could not contain him, nor could all the forces of evil defeat your will and purposes. You have claimed the victory in Jesus. In him, you declare your holiness and that your plan for your world will come to be. We bless you for new life in Jesus and your willingness to pour out your Holy Spirit into our hearts. Thank you that by your Spirit you guide us into the truth that we read in the Bible.

Living God, we come to worship you this day. We long to know more of you, the God of love. When we think of your power and might, and yet know your gentleness with us, and that we belong to you, our hearts are filled with joy. Our lips sing your praises, our minds are filled with beautiful thoughts of you, our hearts reach out to know the warmth of your embrace. We long to worship you in Spirit and in Truth.

As we reach out to you, forgive us, we pray, for our failings and shortcomings, which we mention before you now in the silent prayers of our hearts.....PAUSE.....

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. To all who turn to him, he says, "Your sins are forgiven." He also says, "Follow me."

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 debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Bible Readings

Jeremiah 31: 31 - 34

³¹ "The days are coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

³² It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,"
declares the Lord.

³³ "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time," declares the Lord.

"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbour,
or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,

from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord.
"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Mark 1: 9 – 20

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, ¹³ and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

¹⁶ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. ²⁰ Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Sermon 'A Good News Story'

Introduction

Once upon a time, playwright used to begin with a prologue, which told you, in outline, the sort of production you were going to see and the main themes contained within the play. Here, in the gospel of Mark, he does precisely that. the first 13 verses are a prologue. What comes after the opening verse is presented to us in vivid and striking scenes. He starts, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It's a good news story. In these days of coronavirus, in amongst the heart-rending stories, we've heard some good news stories that have lifted our hearts in the midst of the many tragedies and difficulties. What unfolds in Mark's gospel is the ultimate good news story, the good news of a Saviour, the good news of One who will be our life-companion and friend. Even the parts of his story that challenge and are warnings are still good news.

The Heart of the Good News

In the early verses of Mark's first chapter, we learn about John the Baptist "Preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him" (1:4-5). The OT prophet Malachi had said that God would send a herald and pathbreaker to prepare people for the Lord coming amongst them (Mal3:1). The coming one, John announced, "will baptize with the Holy Spirit" (1:8).

Almost, it seems, as the words of John die away, we're straight into the beginning of the Jesus story. And Mark presses on to announce 3 great recurring themes that will form the heart of the good news.

1. The manner of Jesus' coming – he is truly one with us
2. All that Jesus will do has God's authority and approval
3. Jesus has come to rescue us whatever the cost.

In verses, 9 – 13, we've the briefest outline of the good news of Jesus Christ, the long-promised rescuer of humanity. He's come to be with all those in need. He's come as God's own Son, empowered by God's Holy Spirit and with God's full authority. Nothing can prevent his work of rescue and salvation, whatever the cost. It's an ancient story, but not a story that's a product of its time, like a Victorian novel. This story, of the God who loves us in Jesus, is a timeless story of people being set free to love and be loved, to realize their value and specialness in the One, who's love for humanity took him to the Cross of Calvary.

The Cost of Our Rescue

Verses 12 and 13 of Mark Chapter 1 say, "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert for 40 days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels attended him."

At first glance, these words might seem surprising and unexpected. The previous 3 verses had great promise and potential. Once Jesus had been commissioned by God, we'd have anticipated him going on from strength to strength. Scenes of Jesus, divinely empowered, going from triumph to triumph, until everyone lives happily ever after, would have been a tremendous outcome.

Fortunately, this isn't a fairy story but a story about real life. Real life, as we all know, is a costly business. Things don't always go smoothly. Jesus Christ couldn't have been one with us if his life had gone like a dream. How would we relate to Jesus if he didn't really enter our struggle, our joys and sorrows?

For the coming of Jesus to be good news, he couldn't be spared the cost of rescue. Think about rescuing someone who's in danger of drowning. It's possible to shout instructions to the person who's drowning from the safety of the river bank. A lifeline could be thrown into the water. The emergency services could be called. Jesus doesn't do any of those things. He is the lifeline. He jumps into the water to save the drowning man. He comes right alongside to make the rescue, and ensure the man lives to tell the tale.

Throughout Jesus's trial in the desert, the words, "You are my Son," remain as an echo. Would Jesus choose the way of self-assertion or the way of self-sacrifice? He knows his role is to be the Suffering Servant foretold by the prophet Isaiah (42:1). It was the enduring presence of his Father, signified by "angels attended him" that enabled Jesus to choose the way of self-sacrifice.

In his humanity, Jesus must have known the attraction of another way. He chose to struggle for 40 days in the desert. And in that struggle, we see a forecast of what the final cost was going to be.

We mustn't underestimate the cost to Jesus of our rescue. We mustn't think of Jesus crucifixion as an event divorced from its suffering. Any of us who watched the film "The Passion of the Christ" saw the crucifixion of Christ for the horrible, ghastly, bloody and shocking event that it was. When the Pope was

asked for his views, after he'd seen the film, he said, 'That is what it was like for Jesus.' When people loosely talk about 'being crucified,' meaning they'd had a bad hair day, it's language that's offensive. We know for certain that the way of the Cross shows the depth of Jesus' love for everyone one of us.

Jesus Calls His First Disciples

Sons and daughters following on in the family business have happened many times down the years. John Betjeman's father tried to pressurise him to follow him into the family business. He had no desire to do so. He wasn't remotely interested. Instead, he wanted to be more creative and turn his attention to becoming a poet. His father rather ridiculed such an idea. Perhaps he didn't think it was a proper job. After all, John Betjeman would have been the 4th generation to work in the family business. Nonetheless, he refused and the rest, as they say, is history. Who can forget his poem.....He eventually became the Poet Laureate and is memorialised in Westminster Abbey.

No sooner has Jesus declared that he is the one who brings the kingdom of

God to the people than on a walk beside the Sea of Galilee he calls to a couple of burly, hardy, fishermen, Simon and Andrew, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." We're told by Mark that "at once they left their nets and followed him." (v8). Did Simon and Andrew literally drop everything, on the spot, without a moment's thought of the consequences? Was it as sudden as that? Did they leave dependent family behind? Were they the main earners? Not insignificant things in those days, and even today.

And what about James and John, two other brothers? We're told "they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Jesus." What did their father have to say about that, I wonder?

Did we drop everything to follow Jesus? Did we forsake a family business? Did everything change for us? Did we make a similar step change in lifestyle?

Good News from God and About God

We've got a lot of expressions which are used to back up our belief that people don't change. We say, 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks.' Or 'a leopard can't change its spots.' But when Jesus deals with us this simply isn't true.

Look at Saul of Tarsus, who happily stood by when Stephen was stoned to death in Acts 7. On the Damascus road, Paul changed from being someone who persecuted Christians to someone who preached and taught about the need to be saved. He, subsequently, suffered greatly for his faith. Two disciples on the Emmaus Road, who'd all but given up their faith after Jesus' crucifixion, found their faith re-energised after meeting the risen Jesus on the road.

These life-changing experiences don't just happen to people in the Bible. They happen to you and to me. They may have already happened. Even so, they will happen in the future too. Jesus isn't finished with us yet. His good news is for every time and every occasion.

There are things in life that are always good news like the birth of a baby, getting engaged or married, passing an exam, gaining a qualification, finding a new hobby or developing a new skill or interest, especially in these lockdown days.

This new story is the story of people coming into the kingdom of God. This is how Jesus began his ministry. It's not good views. It's good news. It's not a new politics or a new type of spirituality. It's not just a new call to prayer. It's not just of the moment, as so much is these days. This is the living God, in Jesus Christ, on the move, bringing people into his kingdom. It's about discovering a new way of living that values the individual, not for what they can do or their talents, nor their views on life, or their job or money, but for simply being who they are. Jesus meets us where we are and sets us free to love and be loved, and bring us into a relationship of peace and harmony with God, with others, and with Creation. It's the sense of inter-connectedness that Jewish people refer to as 'Shalom,' a sense of wholeness, calm and ease, with oneself, with people, nature and all that surrounds us.

Final Thoughts

The gospel is the timeless story of a Saviour who broke into human history to bring God's good news into every human life, your life and my life, and into the life of anyone who calls on his name.

The good news of God's saving love in Jesus Christ is never diluted by culture or political system. It stands alone as the most valuable gift we can ever receive.

Jesus is the One who is without sin, who opted into the world, so we might share in an eternal relationship of love with the God who made us in his image.

If you've yet to make a decision to believe in Jesus as your Saviour, make that decision today.

Hymn

There is a higher throne
Than all this world has known,
Where faithful ones from ev'ry tongue will one day come.
Before the Son we'll stand,
Made faultless through the Lamb;
Believing hearts find promised grace —
Salvation comes.

REFRAIN

*Hear heaven's voices sing,
Their thund'rous anthem rings
Through emerald courts and sapphire skies.*

*Their praises rise.
All glory, wisdom, power,
Strength, thanks, and honour are
To God our King, who reigns on high
Forevermore.*

And there we'll find our home,
Our life before the throne;
We'll honour Him in perfect song
Where we belong.
He'll wipe each tear-stained eye
As thirst and hunger die.
The Lamb becomes our Shepherd King;
We'll reign with Him.

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Prayers of Intercession

God of hope, we pray for all those who hold the Light of hope in our lives and in our world.

We pray for those who have developed, and are developing and modifying, vaccines for use in the fight against coronavirus. We pray for the continued rollout of the treatment programme in the 4 nations of the UK and for their deployment around the world, especially in the more disadvantaged nations.

We continue to pray for aid agencies who are holding the light of hope and are helping to build better futures where war and disaster have ravaged and destroyed.

Lord God, we pray for the friend and carer who holds the light of hope for those struggling with mental health issues.

We pray for parents of children with special needs. We pray for teachers and teaching assistants, who have been looking after the children of key workers and children with special needs throughout the pandemic.

Compassionate God, we pray for NHS and Care Staff working long and arduous hours meeting the needs of those who are sick and infirm. Also, we mention before you those who have been a long time on waiting lists for much needed operations.

Loving God, we pray for those who are actively bringing help and healing to a neighbour and to a stranger, those who are staffing Food Banks and those helping people who've run into money difficulties.

God of light and truth, thank you that your light and truth is shining in the lives of so many people in these challenging virus-affected days.

Gracious God, you have called us to live in love, to praise you, to revere you and serve you, in and through your Creation. You are in all things and in all circumstances. Help us, we pray, to appreciate and make use of everything that draws us to you. Rid us of whatever prevents us from living in love in your presence. Help us in the times when love may demand much of us.

God of light, grace and truth, we bring to you our personal prayers for those in need.....PAUSE.....Please meet their needs through the glorious riches you promise in Christ Jesus.

Grant us the faith and love to hold the Christ light for others. Loving God, you alone are our security, our refuge and strength. May our dominating desire and fundamental choice always be to live in love, in your presence. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Hymn

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down:
fix in us Thy humble dwelling,
all Thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love Thou art;
visit us with Thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit

into every troubled breast;
let us all in Thee inherit,
let us find Thy promised rest.
Take away the love of sinning,
Alpha and Omega be;
end of faith, as its beginning,
set our hearts at liberty.

Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all Thy grace receive;
suddenly return, and never,
never more Thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve Thee as Thy hosts above,
pray and praise Thee without ceasing,
glory in Thy perfect love.

Finish then Thy new creation:
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see Thy great salvation,
perfectly restored in Thee:
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before Thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Words: Charles Wesley (1707-88)

Blessing

