

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 26 Sept. 2021. Written service circulated to both churches

Call to Worship (inspired by Psalm 124 and James 5)

If it had not been God who was on our side,
the troubles of our world would have swallowed us whole.
If it had not been God who was on our side,
the sorrows of our times would have swept us away.
Are any among us suffering?
Come and pray.
Are any among us cheerful?
Come sing songs of praise.
Are any among us sick?
Come and ask for healing.
Our help is in our God,
the One who made heaven and earth.
Call upon God, creator and rescuer.
God is on our side.

HYMN We love the place, O God MP 731

We love the place, O God,
in which your honour dwells:
the joy of your abode,
all earthly joy excels.

We love the house of prayer:
for where Christ's people meet,
our risen Lord is there
to make our joy complete.

We love to sing below
of mercies freely given,
but O, we long to know
the triumph-song of heaven.

We love the word of life,
the word that tells of peace,
of comfort in the strife
and joys that never cease.

Lord Jesus, give us grace
on earth to love you more,
in heaven to see your face
and with your saints adore.

Opening prayer (inspired by James 5:13-20)

We will walk this day with you, O God, and you will walk with us,
gathering us into a community to pray for one another in all things.
We will walk this day with you, O Christ, and you will walk with us,
calling us to follow you, helping us to set aside all which holds us back.
We will walk this day with you, O Spirit, and you will walk with us,
sending us out, side by side, to serve those cast aside by the world.

~ written by Thom Shuman

URC Prayer Handbook p59

Offering

You are reminded to send in your gifts for the work of the church.
Holy One, receive our gifts by your grace.
Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

Readings: James 5;13-20
Mark 9:38-50

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Today's readings are hard, what with Jesus telling us to cut off limbs and tear out eyes, though perhaps we could just concentrate on the phrase 'whoever is not against us is for us', as advice about working with others – those of other denominations, or different faiths, or no faith, as long as it makes the world a better place. Or we could focus on the final verse: 'have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.' If we have as our goal being at peace with one another, we would be doing quite well! But I'm going to concentrate more on the passage from James, which if we were to sum it up in one word, is about prayer.

We live in a world where suffering abounds - from the lingering impacts of COVID-19, to ongoing wars and forced displacement of children and families, to devastating wildfires, earthquakes and hurricanes, people across the world are experiencing suffering like never before. And just this week we have heard about the huge rise in the price of gas which will cause problems for so many people and to the food chain. We are starting to hear again that 'Christmas will be cancelled.' Christmas can't be cancelled, because it is not about the gifts and all the food, but that is a topic for another sermon! As we come to the end of the letter of James, a letter filled with ethical teachings and lectures about morals, telling us to be doers, not just hearers of the word of God, it is encouraging to find some teaching about prayer.

From verse 13, James raises a series of questions, which build up to what may be considered the climax of the letter - the power of prayer for the faithful people of God. After each question, "Are any among you suffering? Are any cheerful? Are any among you sick?" James provides short and pithy instructions: "They should pray. They should sing songs of praise. They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them" Here, the writer is not only concerned with individual prayer; rather the impact of a praying community is emphasized by the call of "the elders of the church" to exercise their gifts not solely in administrative oversight, but in the ministry of healing through anointing with oil. We might wonder about the focus on the cheerful in the midst of those who are suffering and those who are sick, but they, too, are called to pray, albeit in the form of songs of praise. This is a sure reminder to those who have faced hardships and persevered through trials and tribulations that there will also be periods of joy and times for celebration. "Singing songs of praise" through good times as well as through times of great suffering or danger illustrates how praise and prayer are linked together in the eyes of God.

It is no accident that faith is connected to prayer: "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven". As

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indicated earlier in the letter, faith is not a passive activity. Faith is active and best summarized by the saying of James: “Faith without works is dead” (2:17)

In times like these, we need an active faith that will bring comfort to those who have lost loved ones to Covid; to those who are still scared to go out and be social; to those who are lonely. We need an active faith that will help the homeless and support those with mental illness. Even if we cannot do much ourselves due to age, illness, or fear, we can always pray. We can raise money for good causes. We can pick up the phone and talk to someone we know who is lonely or going through a hard time.

In the next section, James uses an example of prayer from Elijah to show how prayer is connected to a specific person and situation as opposed to a general teaching. By using the example of Elijah to show the importance of prayer, James is not referring to prayer in an abstract sense; rather, individuals and the entire community are called to offer prayers of faith that can save the sick and redeem the fallen. This prayer of the faithful is powerful and effective. “Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest”. This example of Elijah is not to be taken literally, for there are many cases when prayers are lifted up and disasters still happen. So, what is James trying to tell us here?

Prayer is a link to the power of God — a type of “conversation” with God that exceeds anything of human origin. Prayer is the way through which doors are opened, and the assurance that you will make it through today and have hope for a brighter tomorrow. Prayer changes things! But we all have a responsibility to pray for others, not just for ourselves, which is why our worship always includes prayers of intercession.

And so, I come back to the words of Jesus at the end of our readings from Mark’s gospel. Like Jesus himself, we are to be like salt in the world – caring for our neighbours and glorifying God through our words and actions. We are told here and elsewhere, including Matthew’s gospel that if salt has lost its saltiness, it is useless and should be thrown out. Let us not be so bland that we put God and ourselves to sleep. Let us be salt and light to the world, ever raising prayers to God in times of sickness and despair, and in times of joy.

Hymn What a friend we have in Jesus MP 746

What a friend we have in Jesus All our sins and griefs to bear
And what a privilege to carry Everything to God in prayer
Oh, what peace we often forfeit Oh, what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry Everything to God in prayer

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Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged Take it to the Lord in prayer
Can we find a friend so faithful Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness Take it to the Lord in prayer

Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Saviour, still our refuge! Take it to the Lord in prayer
Do they friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer
In His arms He'll take and shield thee, though wilt find a comfort there.

Prayers of Intercession

God our holy Friend, you allow us share some of your love for the world. While we are here praying for the world's healing, others are busy implementing that healing. Later, when we are out there trying to give of our best, may others remember to pray for us.

Give your grace to all peacemakers; those who endeavour to resolve with justice all conflicts between nations, and within communities, commerce and industry, parliaments, families, marriage partners, colleagues, and friends.

Let your grace support those who fight with and for neglected people; those small ethnic groups with no political clout, the little people who are being ripped off by the rich and unscrupulous, and the deserted wives or husbands who are raising a family alone.

Endow the your merciful people with your sustaining grace; those who treat diseases, bind up wounds, feed the hungry, re-settle the homeless, care for the orphan, visit the prisoner, encourage the handicapped, watch with the dying and grieve with the sorrowful.

Endorse the work of this church with your enabling grace. Keep it close to the agenda of Christ. Let us be joyful in worship, warm in fellowship, inclusive in outreach, open in decision making, humble and sensitive in our outreach to the community.

Bless those who are ill and suffering, those who care for them, and the bereaved...

Visit each of us with your grace, loving Friend. Dismantle our fears, build up our faith, deepen our love, widen our compassion, and open our hearts and minds to discern your will for us.

In the name of the patient, insightful, and healing Christ we offer these prayers. **Amen.**

By Bruce Prewer (amended)

Lord's Prayer

Hymn God wants us as his salt and spice (tune Linstead – Let us talents and tongues employ)

God wants us as his salt and spice,
flav'ring-up the world, sweet and nice.
God wants us to be sharp and hot,
pepper-spicing the world we've got.

*Show the world we care,
love and kindness share,
spread the hope ev'rywhere,
salt and spice!*

God wants us to be salt and spice,
stop the rotting and make things nice.
God empow'rs us to fight decay,
keep things healthy in ev'ry way.

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Refrain

God is sad if we lose our spice,
turning tasteless and not-so-nice.
Let's not fail and be thrown right out,
let's be salty without a doubt!

Refrain

Blessing

Go and be salt and light to the world.
"Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."
And may God save you from all that would harm you;
May Christ Jesus heal you and raise you up;
and may the Holy Spirit anoint you
and give you peace with one another. Amen

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.

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