

Christ Church, 7 Nov. 2021. Written service circulated to all

Call to Worship

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.
It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.” Psalm 127:1-2
Do not be anxious, for the Lord our God grants rest.
Happy are those who worship God and walk in his ways.
Come let us worship the Lord, and praise God’s holy name!

Hymn O worship the King R&S 47

1. O worship the King all glorious above,
O gratefully sing his power and his love:
our shield and defender, the Ancient of Days,
pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise.

4. Thy bountiful care, what tongue can recite?
It breathes in the air, it shines in the light;
it streams from the hills, it descends to the plain,
and sweetly distils in the dew and the rain.

5. Frail children of dust are feeble as frail -
in thee do we trust, for you never fail;
thy mercies, how tender, how firm to the end!
our maker, defender, redeemer, and friend.

6. O measureless Might, ineffable Love,
while angels delight to hymn thee above,
the humbler creation, shall struggle to raise
with true adoration their songs to thy praise!

Robert Grant (1779-1838)

Opening Prayer

O God, you broke down the barriers when you crept in beside us.
In Jesus, your hands touched all, and touched us.
You opened our eyes to see how the hands of the rich were empty,
and the hearts of the poor were full.
You took the widow’s mite and the child’s bread and fish
and used them to show us how to build the world you want.
Here in the company of the friends whom we know
and the stranger in our midst,
and the self from whom we turn,
we ask you to show us how to love as Jesus loved.
Make this the place and time, when heaven and earth become one,
and we know ourselves to be loved by you. **Amen.**

Offering

Forgiving God, people give for so many reasons –
guilt, joy, obligation, gratitude,
obedience, hope, control, thankfulness.
Remind us of your call to examine everything that we have;
after all, our money and possessions are all gifts from you.
You call us to use them wisely, to share them openly, to give them generously.
Receive our offerings
and release us from the foolish temptation
to believe that it is best spent on ourselves rather than on others. **Amen.**

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Readings: Ruth 4:13-17
Mark 12:38-44

I was very much in two minds today, whether to talk about climate change and the environment again. I seem to have preached on it numerous times this year; we've had house groups on the environment, a special Climate Sunday service, prayers for COP26... even I'm starting to get a bit sick of it! But I believe the climate crisis is the biggest thing affecting humanity at the moment. It is probably the biggest issue there has been in all of our lifetimes, so at the mid-point of COP26, I felt I had to say something. As Christians, and as an Eco Church, we have a moral duty to be guardians of God's creation. I feel I have a moral duty as a Minister of Word and Sacrament, to keep on talking about it, even if I am preaching to the choir and everyone in this room is already doing everything they can – praying, teaching others, recycling, eating less meat..., because I am sure there is more we all could be doing. And one of the things we could and should be doing is letting world leaders know we care what happens to the planet; letting them know we want them to take action to stop climate change.

Today's well-known story of the widow's mite, spoke to me in a different way this year, in the midst, as we are, of the COP26 Climate Conference - "this poor [country] has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." You see how taking one word, widow, and replacing it with country, we get a picture of exactly what is happening now in our world. The rich countries have squandered and exploited the resources of the world and the poor countries are paying the price. Our governments are discussing how they can meet the cap on global warming of 1.5 degrees, by doing as little as possible, without radically changing our comfortable lifestyles of cars, mobile phones, and heating for our homes. While the poor countries are already paying with everything that they have. I heard someone talking on the radio from one of the Pacific islands – if the sea rises much more, their islands will completely disappear, gone forever along with the identity, culture and language of the people. He said of course they could move to another place, but it wouldn't be the same. They would be like the millions of refugees we already have from wars and violence – displaced people, with no home, no culture and no chance of ever returning to where they came from. All week there have been stories on the radio and TV from people already affected by changes to the climate, and calls from young people for the world leaders to stop the meaningless talk and really do something.

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Our Gospel reading this week includes both a caution and an example. “Watch out for the scribes” who devour the houses of widows, on the one hand, and “Look at this widow, who put in her whole life,” on the other. It calls us to question: What consumes *our* lives? Where do we put our energy, our finances, and our time? And what results or recognition do we expect in return? Do we want a ‘thank you’, a lot of likes on Facebook, for people to say what a good job we’ve done, or how generous we are?

While many interpretations of this story present the widow’s offering as an example of discipleship – that we should give our whole lives to God and the church, not just an hour on Sunday or a few coins in the offertory plate, but more recently commentators have questioned whether the widow’s action is actually an illustration of systemic injustice - the devouring of widow’s houses which Jesus says the scribes are doing. The temple in Jerusalem was kept going by donations of money and big sacrifices. The bigger the animal you could afford to pay for to be sacrificed, the more important you were seen to be; the more likely your prayers were to be answered.

Perhaps the widow’s house has been devoured as she gives the last of it to a broken system, like countries in Africa and Amazonia are giving to sustain global capitalism. Maybe she places her whole life in the temple treasury because she trusts God with all she has. Or maybe her offering is an expression of trust in God in the midst of a world comprised of broken people, systems, and communities of faith. These people, systems, and communities often forget the call to care for the poor, the undocumented alien, the widow, and the orphan. Just as the world – the wealthy north, has forgotten to take care of the poor in the south who are bearing the brunt of climate change, in our insatiable desires for more stuff, for our blind following of an economic system that builds in inequality, that leads to super rich at one end and millions of people living in poverty at the other, rather than everyone having enough for their needs.

Jesus tells us to guard against the scribes who pursue prestige, respect, and honour and against those who would devour widows’ houses. This devouring was likely the result of either the demand for monetary gifts to the temple that the widows couldn’t pay, or mismanagement of the widow’s assets by the scribes entrusted to take care of them. Given the concern for widows expressed throughout the Bible, it is no wonder Jesus is not pleased with the way the scribes are treating them. Rather than lifting up those with power and influence in the community, Jesus identifies the widow as having given more: she gives herself.

The midpoint of the COP26 conference is a good time to reflect on what devours and consumes our society and indeed what consumes us. Are we more focussed on being

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popular and well liked, than on God? Are we more focussed on our next new car, or upgrading our mobile phone? Or can we be more like the widow, who gave everything she had?

Now, to end on a slightly more cheerful note, our other reading from the book of Ruth has a slight hint of Christmas. Can anyone tell me what the link is?

(There's two actually – Naomi was from Bethlehem).

“A son has been born to Naomi. They named him Obed: he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.” And Jesus is descended from David. He is descended from a family from Bethlehem. We shall learn more about the importance of that in our Advent House Groups starting in a couple of weeks (quick plug there!) Jesus is descended from a Moabite woman, Naomi's daughter in law, Ruth. The Moabites were outsiders, the 'undocumented alien'. They were not part of the people of Israel, God's people. They worshipped other gods and the Jewish people did not like them, but because of Ruth's kindness to Naomi, she was taken in by Naomi's people and her son became part of that community and an ancestor to Jesus. And you only need to watch a few episodes of *Who Do You Think You Are?* to learn how important people's past and their distant family can be. And did you notice – both Naomi and Ruth were widows – the lowest of the low in Israelite society, the people the Bible tells us over and over again that we must care for. Jesus may have been descended from King David, but David was a lowly shepherd, and his great-grandmother was an undocumented refugee widow. Top that *Who Do You Think You Are?*!

Hymn God, who stretched the spangled heavens R&S 86, Tune *Abbott's Leigh* R&S 560

God, who stretched the spangled heavens,
infinite in time and place,
flung the suns in burning radiance
through the silent fields of space,
we, your children, in your likeness,
share inventive powers with you.
Great Creator, still creating,
show us what we yet may do.

Proudly rise our modern cities,
stately buildings row on row;
yet their windows, blank, unfeeling,
stare on canyoned streets below,
where the lonely drift unnoticed
in the city's ebb and flow,
lost to purpose and to meaning,
scarcely caring where they go.

We have conquered worlds undreamed of
since the childhood of our race;
known the ecstasy of winging
through uncharted realms of space;
probed the secrets of the atom,
yielding unimagined power,
facing us with life's destruction
or our most triumphant hour.

As each far horizon beckons,
may it challenge us anew,
children of creative purpose,
serving others, honouring you.
May our dreams prove rich with promise,
each endeavour well begun.
Great Creator, give us guidance
till our goals and yours are one.

Catherine Cameron

Prayers of Intercession

Creator God, who made our beautiful world,
appointed us as its guardians and gifted us with everything we need,
forgive us for the times we cause it harm;
for the times our way of life affects our neighbours.
Inspire us to care for the environment; to help rebuild lives and communities;
to share in the griefs and anxieties, joys and hopes of all your people,
so that all your creation may flourish. **Amen.**

Stephen Davies/CAFOD

As the United Nations climate conference, COP26, continues in Glasgow, let us bring our prayers to God, who created the earth and all within it.

We pray for world leaders: that they may all work together, through the decisions taken, to protect the planet and all life within it. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the Church: may we discern our roles and tasks arising from the decisions taken at COP26 and take action to achieve them. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the world; that our collective actions will begin the long process of repair to the damage we have caused and that God will help us become better stewards. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our church and local community: that decisions taken in our church life will help us live simply, sustainably and in solidarity with the earth and all life within it. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the world, our common home: that through God's grace we may hear its cry of the damage done and be moved to protect it for future generations to enjoy. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those people who are already facing droughts, famine, floods and storms: that God may grant them strength and hope for the future as they work to adapt to the changing climate. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

In the silence, we pray for those known to us who are ill, lonely, isolating because of Covid-19, and the bereaved.

And, as we come in our Church Meeting to consider a proposal to become a place of welcome to those leaving prison, we pray for all prisoners, that they may repent of what they have done wrong, and learn from their mistakes. We pray for those wrongfully accused and those imprisoned for their convictions, their faith or for being a journalist in countries where the truth is not acceptable to those who govern.

O God, who calls all people to justice and care for the earth, hear and grant these prayers.

Through Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Lord's Prayer

Hymn When out of poverty is born (tune at R&S 349 – I heard the voice of Jesus say)

Technically this is an Advent hymn, but it fits well with our themes for today. I think the words will be new to you, but the tune isn't, and you may know it as it was the Christian Aid Christmas Carol in 2020 (<https://youtu.be/MzwyjnACz0o>)

When out of poverty is born
a dream that will not die,
and landless, weary folk find strength
to stand with heads held high,
it's then we learn from those who wait
to greet the promised day,
'The Lord is coming; don't lose heart.
Be blest: prepare the way!'

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When people wander far from God,
forget to share their bread,
they find their wealth an empty thing,
their spirits are not fed.
For only just and tender love
the hungry soul will stay.
And so God's prophets echo still
'Be blest: prepare the way!'

When God took flesh and came to earth,
the world turned upside down,
and in the strength of woman's faith
the Word of Life was born.
She knew that God would raise the low,
it pleased her to obey.
Rejoice with Mary in the call,
'Be blest: prepare the way!'

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Blessing

Holy One, open our ears to hear your Spirit groaning over all creation.
Open our eyes to see that when we injure the earth and its resources, we are hurting you.
May we have the heart of Jesus to bless all your creation that there might be a liveable future for us all. And may the blessing of God the Creator, the love of Christ the Redeemer, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit our guide and Sustainer, be with us all, evermore. Amen

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