

Call to worship (inspired by Psalm 36:5-10)

No matter how far we wander from you, O God,
your steadfast love finds us.
No matter how unjust the world seems to us, O God,
your steadfast righteousness sustains us.
No matter how vulnerable our lives seem to us, O God,
your steadfast presence gives us hope.
No matter how unloved and uncared for we feel, O God,
you hear our cries and answer our prayers.
Thanks be to God!

Hymn Praise to the Lord, the Almighty R&S 74

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!
come ye who hear, brothers and sisters, draw near;
praise him in glad adoration!

Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,
bears thee on eagle's wings, and through all troubles sustaineth!
hast thou not seen all that is needful hath been
granted in what he ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee!
Surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend thee;
ponder anew all the Almighty can do,
who with his love doth befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord, oh, let all that is in me adore him!
All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him;
Let the Amen sound from his people again,
gladly for aye we adore Him.

Joachim Neander

Opening Prayer

God of abundant and steadfast love,
we gather to worship and praise you.
There is no way we as humans can measure the immensity of God's love
because it is as vast as the immeasurable heavens;
God's love is deeper than the deepest seas;
and all of creation cannot contain all the love
that flows so faithfully and generously from God's heart of grace.
How precious is God's love to us,
we, who forever have doubts about how loveable we are!
All-loving and all-merciful God,
help us today to accept the searching light of God's love into our lives,
so that with honest hearts, we may experience God's just peace
surrounding and upholding us in our daily struggles in faithfulness.
Help us to always rely on your eternal promises,
so that claiming these promises as our very own,
we may daily grow in love and in our commitment
to our Holy and Righteous God,
and seek to serve God all our days. Amen.

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Confession and Assurance of Pardon

If we say we are without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins.
Let us confess our sins together and seek God's forgiveness:

**Holy God, we confess before you that we have not loved you with our whole being;
we have not loved our neighbour as ourselves.**

**In your infinite mercy, forgive us when we turn from you,
release us from the burdens of our past,
and remake us in your image and likeness
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen**

Jesus said, 'your sins are forgiven.' Thanks be to God.

Gifts

Holy One, all that we have comes from you. Accept our gifts for your work in the world,
and to you be the glory and praise always. **Amen**

**Bible readings: Isaiah 62:1-5
 1 Corinthians 12:1-13**

I hadn't thought of it this way before, but coming so soon after Christmas, and the gift giving of the Magi. today's reading from 1 Corinthians provides a different take on the concept of giving and receiving gifts. Where popular stories about Father Christmas depict a magnanimous giver doling out longed-for presents for the sake of individual enjoyment, Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts imagines a divine giver who bestows gifts based on what will most contribute to the common good of a whole community. Ultimately, this distribution of gifts serves to make the Holy Spirit itself manifest among the community of believers. This manifestation of the Spirit is a fitting theme to explore during the season of Epiphany and in particular today as during our Church Meeting we will further discuss our plans for the future in the form of work to our building. Such a project will, or at better said, should, involve the gifts of many, not just a handful of people. We will need gifts of discernment. The gift of those skilled in praying to pray for the project. Leaders to guide things. Those with financial skills to write grant applications and those with imagination and organisational skills to come up with fund-raising ideas. We will need people to be generous, with money, time and creative skills. We will need gifts of cooperation and open-mindedness. What we probably won't need, depending on your interpretation of it, is the gift of 'speaking in tongues'!

First Corinthians 12 begins with words that Paul uses several times in the letter: "Now concerning...". While this formula of words indicates that Paul is beginning a new subject, it also seems to signal that he is responding to issues that were raised by the Corinthians themselves. We should remember that the letter to the Corinthians is responding to a letter that came from the community in Corinth, probably asking questions or raising issues that

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they expected Paul to answer and solve. They were a community of new, Gentile, Christians who were formerly pagan worshippers and who were surrounded by pagan worshippers and those who followed the general ‘religion’ of the day, namely worshiping the Roman Emperor. In the letter to the Corinthians, we are receiving only one side of the dynamic conversation that was happening between Paul and the congregation in Corinth. It is also helpful to place this passage within the context of the rest of the letter. Though Paul discusses several theological problems throughout the letter, his thoughts in chapter one, set the stage for everything that the letter will later address: “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” Paul’s appeal for unity and the abolition of divisions provides an important backdrop for this section in chapter 12 where he explores how unity can still be achieved even in the midst of quite big differences.

One of his central points is the celebration of diversity and difference. We know that several people in the congregation at Corinth saw speaking in tongues, as the proof, if you will, of true Christian belief, and Paul was keen to point out that all gifts are necessary and worthwhile and are inspired by the same Spirit. He goes on, in the verses we didn’t read, with his example of the human body and how one part cannot function without all the others. If the whole body were an ear, how would you hear, or walk, or talk, and so on. The phrase “Jesus is Lord” is also worth reflecting on. Though deceptively simple on the surface, this claim makes a radical political statement. That is, to claim that Jesus is Lord is also to claim that Caesar and other human leaders are not. Such claims would have been viewed with suspicion in the Corinthian community of the time, and Christians who made such claims publicly would have faced a number of potentially negative consequences. So, Paul’s statement that this phrase can only be spoken through the Holy Spirit makes more sense. Paul seems to be asserting that only the Holy Spirit can offer the courage necessary to make such a proclamation considering the potentially fatal consequences. And we too, will need the courage provided by the Holy Spirit to step out in faith that we can go ahead with all aspects of the building project, alongside the mission opportunities the renovations will provide.

And, just as the Spirit inspires the courage necessary to proclaim Jesus’s lordship, and take on new projects, so the same Spirit distributes a variety of gifts, and the same Spirit is responsible for activating all gifts. Interestingly, the verb that Paul uses in verse 11 to describe the Spirit’s distribution of gifts is the same verb used in Luke’s Parable of the Prodigal Son to describe the father’s division of his estate between his sons. The image of

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bequeathing an inheritance seems fitting for Paul's larger argument here. That is, the Spirit is envisaged as giving out different gifts to different people for the sake of the common good. We too should reflect on what gifts we can give for the greater, common, good. It is the same God who activates all these gifts. "In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." The body of Christ, the church, has many members, and all are members of the one body regardless of any kind of difference, and regardless of skills and abilities – for no one can be good at everything and all gifts from those perceived to be of low worth, to those perceived to be of high worth, are helpful and useful. As we have learnt during the pandemic, it is the people we previously thought of as not very important – care-home staff, shelf stockers, delivery drivers, who proved to be the most essential. So do not worry if you cannot donate money, or write a grant application, there will be something you can do, and that too will be necessary.

Hymn O love that wilt not let me go R&S 511

Oh love that will not let me go
I rest my weary soul in thee
I give thee back the life I owe
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be

Oh joy that seekest me through pain
I cannot close my heart to thee
I trace the rainbow through the rain
And feel the promise is not vain
That morn shall tearless be

Oh light that followest all my way
I yield my flickering torch to thee
My heart restores its borrowed ray
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be

Oh cross that liftest up my head
I dare not ask to fly from thee
I lay in dust's life's glory dead
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be

George Matheson

Lord's Supper

The Gospel reading for today is the wedding at Cana, where our Lord changed water into wine, the first of his miracles that caused his disciples to believe. We believe, without having seen Christ's miracles. We believe through his death and resurrection and through the gifts of bread and wine that we come now to share.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

And also with you.

Prayer from the URC Prayer Handbook p9 by Carla Grosch-Miller

Send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine,
and upon your people, that Christ may be with us,
and we may be ready to live for you
and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this is remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as

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you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us.
You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service.
Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living
may be part of the life of your kingdom,
and that our love may be your love
reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

God of wonder and mystery, God of the stars and the universe,
God of winding ways and straight paths, we gather today with gratitude
for the gift of your constant presence, your trustworthy guidance,
and your love for us despite our inability to respond fully.
On our own journeys toward the guiding points you put before us,
you continue to lead us forward,
guiding us by the teachings of Jesus
to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly in your loving shadow.
We pray for our church, and especially our Church Meeting today – guide us by your grace to make
decisions in accordance with your will, not our will.

In this Jubilee year, we pray for our Queen and our country.
And we pray for the United Reformed Church in its 50th year,
that she may seek to build up and renew.
We pray for our church leaders,
that they may continually seek your Spirit
in their lives and their daily decisions.

We pray for peace in this world,
the kind of peace in which we celebrate diversity,
are joyfully challenged by adversity,
and share in the joy that is to be found everywhere.
We pray for those who are lonely,
that you might lead us to reach out and be friends.
We pray for those who are hungry,
that you might lead us to offer sustenance.
We pray for those who are lost,
that you might lead us to give hope and direction.

And we pray that we might continue on this Epiphany journey,
learning the lessons you offer,
seeking to live as you would have us live, and to act as you would have us act.

In the silence we bring to mind all those known to us who are ill, those in hospital, those receiving
treatment or waiting for test results, and those who mourn...
Wrap them in your love and grace and grant them peace.
These prayers and hopes we offer
in confidence and gratitude of your love and presence.

Lord's Prayer

Hymn There's a wideness in God's mercy R&S 353, omit v2

There's a wideness in God's mercy
Like the wideness of the sea
There's a kindness in God's justice
Which is more than liberty

There is grace enough for thousands
Of new worlds as great as this
There is room for fresh creations
in the Lord's unfathomed bliss

For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of our mind
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind

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

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

F. W Faber

Epiphany Blessing

Go in peace, and may the God who protected the Holy Child
cover you and keep you,
the God who came to be with us, be found beside you
and the love within you be called into safety by the gentle Holy Spirit. Amen

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