

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 147)

How good it is to sing praises to our God!
God heals the broken hearted,
binding up their wounds.
God counts the stars, and calls them each by name.
How great is our God, with absolute power!
God's understanding is beyond comprehension.
So come, sing out your thanksgiving to God.
Offer to God that worship that belongs to the Holy One alone!

Hymn Let all the world R&S 114, Tune ii *Luckington*

Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!
The heavens are not too high,
His praise may thither fly;
The earth is not too low,
His praises there may grow.
Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!

Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!
The church with psalms must shout,
No door can keep them out;
But, more than all, the heart
Must bear the longest part.
Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!

George Herbert

Children's Time

Gifts

Merciful God, the gifts we bring are so small in comparison to the vast needs in our world
nowhere near enough to save the thousands dying of starvation all around the world,
or even to meet the needs of the hungry and homeless in our own country.
Yet we have brought what we can.
Through your Holy Spirit, use our gifts that they may be a blessing
and comfort to many, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Hymn Sing to the Lord a joyful song R&S 77 (Tune *Gonfalon Royal* at 136)

Sing to the Lord a joyful song,
Lift up your hearts, your voices raise;
To us His gracious gifts belong,
To Him our songs of love and praise.

For life and love, for rest and food,
For daily help and nightly care,
Sing to the Lord, for He is good,
And praise His name, for it is fair.

For strength to those who on Him wait,
His truth to prove, His will to do,

Praise ye our God, for He is great,
Trust in His name, for it is true.

For joys untold, that from above
Cheer those who love His sweet employ,
Sing to our God, for He is love,
Exalt His name, for it is joy.

Sing to the Lord of heaven and earth,
Whom angels serve and saints adore,
The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
To whom be praise forevermore.

J.S.B. Monsell

Children leave for Sunday Club

Opening Prayer

Lord God, through Jesus you opened the eyes of the blind;
you healed the sick and you fed the hungry.
We give you thanks and praise for your mercy and your love.
Loving Father, by the Spirit you restore strength to the weary
and give hope to those who are in despair.
We give you thanks and praise for your mercy and your love.

You call us Lord to proclaim your deeds and your wonders to all people,
You call us to worship and serve you that all may be made whole.
You offer us a new life of righteousness.
We give you thanks and praise for your mercy and your love.
Make us worthy, O Lord, to receive all your gifts.
Descend on us like the light of a new day
give light to our souls and put your praise upon our lips. Amen.

Hymn The voice of God R&S 131

The voice of God goes out to all the world;
His glory speaks across the universe.
The great King's herald cries from star to star:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

The Lord has said: 'Receive my messenger,
My promise to the world, my pledge made flesh,
A lamp to every nation, light from light':
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

The broken reed he will not trample down,
Nor set his heel upon the dying flame.

He binds the wounds, and health is in his hand:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

Anointed with the Spirit and with power,
He comes to crown with comfort all the weak,
To show the face of justice to the poor:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

His touch will bless the eyes that darkness held,
The lame shall run, the halting tongue shall sing,
And prisoners laugh in light and liberty:
With power, with justice, he will walk his way.

Luke Connaughton

Prayer for illumination

Creating God, it has been told to us since the very beginning
that you are truly the Lord of all that is and ever shall be.
You are the God of both the prince and pauper,
of feast and famine, of the mighty and the weak —
and yet, you do not favour the strong over the powerless.
Remind us of your love as we read the scriptures,
O God of True Justice. Open our eyes — open our hearts —
that we may be strengthened and renewed by your Word. Amen

Bible reading: **Isaiah 40:21-31**
 Mark 1:29-39

Up until now in 2024, the lectionary has been following Mark's Gospel chronologically. That will change next week, with Transfiguration Sunday and then we are into Lent. But for today, our gospel reading follows straight on from last week's, though I'm guessing you didn't follow the lectionary last week, so a quick re-cap. After choosing his first four disciples, we see Jesus performing his first act of power or miracle, by casting out a demon from a man in the synagogue. A very public act that causes his fame to spread throughout the surrounding region. In today's reading, Jesus continues healing, but in a more private setting; in the home of Simon and Andrew, where Simon's mother-in-law has a fever. First, I'd like to say a bit about casting out demons, or exorcism, since this is not something we are used to in the modern world. This focus on casting out demons, and there's a lot of it in Mark's gospel, is difficult for us, because we don't think of evil spirits as being the cause of illness. To attribute symptoms like shouting and convulsing with possession by an unclean spirit or demon does not fit with our understanding of the causes of mental or

physical illness. It just so happens that the February issue of *Reform* addressed this matter with the question ‘did Jesus cast out real demons?’ Four different people answered the question. Rebecca Dean, a New Testament lecturer pointed out that “what lies at the heart of these narratives is not an explanation of the precise nature of the forces of evil, but rather a report of the astonishing ways in which Jesus is able to counter them bringing healing and integration.” And I think that is the most important thing to focus on – Jesus’s response to the forces of evil.

2000 years ago, they didn’t have the medical knowledge we now have, or even that we had a few hundred years ago. Any healing that was done would have been by touch – the laying on of hands, prayer, or maybe some herbal remedies. We see in today’s story how Jesus takes Simon’s mother-in-law by the hand and in most of his healings, Jesus touches the person. What is remarkable about this healing, is its brevity and its tenderness. In verse 31 Jesus “took her by the hand and lifted her up.” The action is simple and direct and not as elaborate as some other healing stories. Here the embodied action speaks volumes. Having been lifted up, “raised,” the mother-in-law begins to “serve” them. On the most literal level it may mean that she gets up and prepares and serves them food. But the verb “to serve” is a key term in Mark’s gospel. Its presence here shows that her service is to be interpreted as a response of faith. Meaning both to serve at a table and to do ministry, the Greek verb used is the same one used of the angels in the wilderness who wait on Jesus. It is the same verb used of the women who followed Jesus and served him, mentioned in chapter 15 of Mark when the women are preparing to care for his body. Serving epitomizes Jesus’ own ministry: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” This healed woman is an icon of resurrection and a paradigm of Christian ministry. She’s not simply putting plates on a table.

Mark’s gospel invites us to look for experiences of resurrection in everyday life in the lives of families and in the social and political order. A debilitating fever is equivalent to death if one cannot do what is human to do, to serve, to feed, to provide for. To be released from illness and restored to oneself means you can fulfil responsibilities to others. Repair of the bonds of family is a dimension of resurrection. In Mark’s gospel there is no true individual healing, only those that repair relationship, son to father, daughter to mother, and here, mother to children and their spouses. Even the unaccompanied woman who touches Jesus’s cloak in the crowd, in chapter 5, when healed, becomes a “daughter”.

The resurrection life that Jesus proclaims here at the opening of Mark’s gospel and that Christians experience, is not unambiguous or uncomplicated in the world in which we live. The verses that follow this story of resurrection suggest the enormity of the suffering of the

people – we hear how in the evening they brought him all who were sick and “the whole city was gathered around the door” and the toll the ministry takes on Jesus.

That is another aspect to this story, that Jesus took himself away to a deserted place to pray and the disciples were so desperate to find him, that they “hunted for him”. If we imagine that Jesus, like most ministers, is an introvert, he would need time away from the crowds and his disciples to recover and feel rejuvenated. People are beginning to crowd in on Jesus, so it’s not surprising if he feels peopled-out! It begins at the home of Simon and Andrew just as the Sabbath ends. Jesus obliges by healing many and casting out even more demons. Yet he still desires to keep his identity hidden and so he makes sure to keep the demons from disclosing anything, just as he did in last week’s story when he told the demon to be silent, because it had recognised Jesus as the “Holy one of God”. It is a well-recognised aspect of Mark’s Gospel that Jesus keeps his identity as Messiah hidden until near the end, especially from his disciples, but we as readers know his identity from the very beginning of Mark’s gospel – this is the “good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God.” And all this is important. Not because the events happen in an important place or to important people, but because Jesus’ own epiphany is both hidden and revealed. The demons were silenced because they knew the significance of who Jesus was.

The next part of the story is that Jesus goes away to a deserted place to be alone and pray. Mark is careful to note the time of day – it is in the morning, while it was still very dark. Mark has been careful to portray Jesus as something special: a charismatic healer whose hand and touch matter for the well-being of others. Yet this same Jesus prays to be grounded in God. The disciples and all the others are perturbed by his departure, saying that everyone is looking for him. But they did not really need to find him, for Jesus himself announces that it is time to move on and go further afield. This Jesus, grounded in his deep relationship to God, announces that it is time to go through all of Galilee to preach, cast out demons and heal.

This story has three parts a healing story, a description of the multitude brought to Jesus and the many who are healed, and an account of Jesus going to the wilderness to pray. It is only after prayer that he expresses his resolve to go to preach in the towns throughout Galilee. The scenes alternate between private and public, an encounter among a few people in a house, then a crowd outside around the door, then prayer in a deserted place, then decision to preach throughout Galilee. The sequence illustrates Jesus’s escalating fame and the tension which that creates. And so it continues in chapter 2 of Mark’s gospel – more crowds, more healing, more amazement.

But let us return to the woman at the start of this segment of the story. The unnamed woman who as soon as she is cured goes about serving. She models Christ's own example of service, thinking of others before herself. If you've ever had a fever, you'll know that even once it's gone, the last thing you want to do straight away is get up and serve people. You'd want some rest to build yourself up first. Not this woman!

The resurrection life that Jesus proclaims is not easy. There is so much suffering that we can easily become overwhelmed and disheartened by how little we can do. But two things we can take away – even Jesus needed time alone and needed to pray. We too can be strengthened by prayer and quiet reflection. And that Jesus will lift us up. He will take us by the hand and raise us up, but the response to that is not simple gratitude, or praise but service of others.

Hymn How sweet the name of Jesus sounds R&S 277 Tune ii *St Peter*

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
in a believer's ear!
it soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds
and drives away our fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole,
and calms the troubled breast;
it satisfies the hungry soul,
and gives the weary rest.

Dear name, the rock on which I build,
my shield and hiding-place;
my never-failing treasury, filled
with boundless stores of grace:

Jesus, my Shepherd, Brother, Friend,
my Prophet, Priest and King;
my Lord, my life, my way, my end –
accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart,
and cold my warmest thought;
but when I see you as you are,
I'll praise you as I ought.

Till then I would your love proclaim
with every fleeting breath;
and may the music of your name
refresh my soul in death.

John Newton

Prayers of intercession

O holy One, we come to you in need of your leading and instruction.

We so often become bogged down in the details of life and forget to see the bigger picture.

We so often give ourselves to what we think is necessary and fail to see what is needful.

Forgive us our short-sightedness and arrogance.

We have been reminded today of how Jesus met needs all about him but did not succumb to the tyranny of demands and many clamouring voices of the crowd. Help us to follow his example. We tend to think in terms of doing things primarily where we live, but Jesus thought of people elsewhere who had needs.

We tend to take our signals from others, Jesus took his direction from within.

We tend to live life at a frenetic pace, Jesus went out to the desert alone and prayed to find renewal.

We tend to be provincial in the scope of our concerns, Jesus thought of other communities who needed the good news.

As we walk the Christian journey we pray that you will provide us a greater vision.

Interrupt our frenetic activity. Help us to find the creative spiritual pause which will make clearer our mission and refresh us for it. Help us to see all people as your people and to know that we have the responsibility to love them. Help us to have the courage to change the way we go about life and to make it both more rewarding and more fruitful.

We ask your care for all the suffering of the world. Be with those who are living with the effects of natural disasters and climate change. Be with those who are living with the effects of war - Be with those who are hungry. Be with those who are homeless.

God, our healer, we pray for those who are sick, and for those who look after them.
We pray for those who are full of anxiety and for those who carry the word of courage and faith.
God, our consoler, we pray for those who are sorrowful, and for those who have been bereaved.
We pray for the weary and for those weighed down by chronic illness, pain or frailty.
We pray for those exhausted by the demands of work or caring for others.
And for those who turn to you for new strength.

God of life, God of hope, God of all, lift us on your love like eagle's wings
Sustain us, Guide us, Heal us then send us forth into the world that we may love as you love.
All this we ask in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us when we pray to say:

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Jesus lover of my soul R&S 332

Jesus, lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high:
Hide me, O my Savior, hide,
Till the storm of life is past;
Safe into the haven guide;
O receive my soul at last.

Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in Thee I find;
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint,
Heal the sick and lead the blind.
Just and holy is Thy name,
I am all unrighteousness;
false and full of sin I am,
Thou art full of truth and grace.

Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee;
Leave, oh, leave me not alone,
Still support and comfort me.
All my trust on Thee is stayed,
All my help from Thee I bring;
Cover my defenceless head
With the shadow of Thy wing.

Plenteous grace with Thee is found,
Grace to cover all my sin;
Let the healing streams abound;
Make and keep me pure within.
Thou of life the fountain art,
Freely let me take of Thee;
Spring Thou up within my heart,
Rise to all eternity.

Charles Wesley

Blessing

Go now, and trust in God's mercy for your strength.
Proclaim the good news wherever God calls you,
and do not set yourselves apart from others,
but be all things to all people for the sake of the gospel.
And may God give you the strength and freedom of an eagle.
May Christ be the bread that nourishes and renews you.
And may the Holy Spirit be the rising wind beneath your wings. Amen