

## The Way Forward

### Welcome & Call to Worship

Hello, to everyone who is watching this video – whoever, wherever and whenever you are.

This video has been produced by the Gloucestershire Circuit of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, and I'm Alan Jackson, a local preacher in this Circuit. Welcome again to all of you. We are delighted to be sharing in worship with you.

But let's begin with a very well-known hymn by Charles Wesley: "Jesus, the name high over all".

### Hymn StF 357 – Jesus the name high over all

Jesus – the name high over all, In hell, or earth, or sky!  
Angels and men before him fall, And devils fear and fly.

Jesus – the name to sinners dear, The name to sinners given!  
It scatters all their guilty fear, It turns their hell to heaven.

Jesus – the prisoner's fetters breaks, And bruises Satan's head;  
Power into strengthless souls it speaks, And life into the dead.

O that the world might taste and see The riches of his grace!  
The arms of love that compass me Would all the earth embrace.

His only righteousness I show, His saving grace proclaim;  
'Tis all my business here below To cry: 'Behold the Lamb!'

Happy if with my latest breath I might but gasp his name;  
Preach him to all, and cry in death: 'Behold, behold the Lamb!'

### Prayer

Let us pray.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, Giver of Life, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; at the opening of this day you call us out of darkness into your marvellous light; Blessed are you for ever and ever. Amen.

### Prayers of Intercession

And now, some prayers of intercession.

We remember those who face the fire of persecution, oppression, hate, tyranny and war  
*(silence)*

May your Spirit help us stand alongside them, sharing their baptism and their pain, and offering our strength to wash away the barriers to human freedom and fulfilment.

Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer

We remember those who are blown about by doubt, by fear, by what they read, by what other people say.

*(silence)*

May your Spirit teach us not only to proclaim the truth, but to live out your truth as solid ground for all to stand on.

## Prerecorded Circuit Service – 29 August 2021

Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer

We remember those who are overwhelmed by the floods of sickness, loneliness, debt, age, betrayal, overwork and guilt.

*(silence)*

May your Spirit fire our love to reach out with warm, open arms and a living burning hope to all those around us.

Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer

We remember those who are facing the return of their physical body to the earth, but who cannot see past the open grave.

*(silence)*

May your Spirit help us to blow away the clouds of doubt and fear, not only in their hearts but in our own.

Lord, in your mercy, Hear our prayer

Spirit of love, who floated over the waters of creation, who gave breath to the prophets, and on whose truth the Church is grounded, set your fire in us, that we may see visions, dream dreams, and go out to the world around us. Amen.

### ***Our Father***

And now we'll say together the prayer Jesus taught us, in whichever version, in whichever language is closest to our hearts

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name: thy kingdom come: thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever; AMEN.

Amen. And now let us continue to praise God by joining in some words from Psalm 45

### **Psalm 45 verses 1 to 9, 16 and 17**

My heart is stirred by a noble theme as I recite my verses for the king; my tongue is the pen of a skilful writer.

You are the most excellent of men and your lips have been anointed with grace, since God has blessed you for ever.

Gird your sword on your side, you mighty one;  
clothe yourself with splendour and majesty.

In your majesty ride forth victoriously  
in the cause of truth, humility and justice;  
let your right hand achieve awesome deeds.

Let your sharp arrows pierce the hearts of the king's enemies;  
let the nations fall beneath your feet.

Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;  
a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom.

## Prerecorded Circuit Service – 29 August 2021

You love righteousness and hate wickedness;  
therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions  
by anointing you with the oil of joy.  
All your robes are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia;  
from palaces adorned with ivory  
the music of strings makes you glad.

Daughters of kings are among your honoured women;  
at your right hand is the royal bride in gold of Ophir.  
Your sons will take the place of your fathers;  
you will make them princes throughout the land.  
I will perpetuate your memory through all generations;  
therefore the nations will praise you for ever and ever.

Our Gospel for this Sunday is from a series of recorded Gospel readings by the Revd Phil Summers.

### **Reading: Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23**

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the market-place they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, ‘Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?’

He replied, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.” You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.’

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.’ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.’

### **Talk – What does this mean?**

For the Word of God in Scripture  
For the Word of God around us  
For the Word of God within us  
Thanks be to God

And it’s not an easy word, is it. The Pharisees are – quite rightly – complaining that Jesus’s disciples are not following the rules – in particular, they aren’t washing their hands in the proper way before meals.

And Jesus challenges them – not denying it, or trying to play it down, but actually attacking the Pharisees, saying No! Your rules – they are not God’s Law; they are just human rules. And not content with that, he goes on to actually reject the whole basis of the Pharisee’s

## Prerecorded Circuit Service – 29 August 2021

religious system, the idea that the important thing is to keep ourselves separate from anything out there that might defile them.

Let's be clear about this. Jesus says that the whole idea that we are goodies, that we are trying to protect ourselves from the corruption of the world outside, that evil is always trying to attack us, and undermine us, to drag us away from God's will, this is false. The truth is that the evil is inside us. We by what we produce, by what comes out of us, we contaminate the world outside us, we contaminate other people, we contaminate the world.

And furthermore, it's not what we do that is the problem; that is just a symptom of the real problem – the real problem is the corruption that is natural to our human hearts.

Therefore trying to treat evil by obeying rules is futile: at best it's like trying to treat measles by wrapping yourself in clingfilm – the best it can possibly achieve is reducing the contamination of other people; it certainly won't heal you, indeed it will probably do more harm than good.

No: rules have their place, but they are palliative – they cure nothing, they change nothing, because the evil is coming from the heart, from the foundation of our being, and the human heart is fundamentally corrupt. We are fundamentally corrupt in a way that no rules are going to cure.

But if this is true, what hope is there for us? If we can't fix the evil by following rules, how can we fix the evil? We can't. The rules are the best we can do; and all they achieve is to make us a bit less harmful to the world around us. We can do nothing that is genuinely going to fix the evil that is in us.

Nothing, that is, except acknowledge the truth of what we are, to give up on trying, to give up on trying to obey rules, and instead ask a greater power to step in, to come into us and clean us, clean us from the very fundamental depths of our being.

To ask Jesus to come into our lives.

But if Jesus is to come in, but not to impose a set of rules, then how?

Well, that's a question for later in the service: for now, let's just take that first step, and acknowledge where we are with an act of confession. Let us pray.

### **Confession**

Holy God, Maker of all, have mercy on us.

Jesus Christ, Servant of the poor, have mercy on us.

Holy Spirit, Breath of life, have mercy on us.

Before God, with the people of God, I confess to my brokenness:

to the ways I wound my life,

the lives of others, and the life of the world.

*(Silence)*

May God forgive me, Christ renew me,

and the Spirit enable me to grow in love. Amen

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Do not call anything impure that God has declared pure.

Amen

## Prerecorded Circuit Service – 29 August 2021

And a hymn that Charles Wesley wrote when he was in this situation: where shall my wondering soul begin?

### **Hymn StF 454 – Where shall my wondering soul begin?**

Where shall my wondering soul begin? How shall I all to heaven aspire?  
A slave redeemed from death and sin, A brand plucked from eternal fire,  
How shall I equal triumphs raise, Or sing my great deliverer's praise?

O how shall I the goodness tell, Father, which thou to me hast showed?  
That I, a child of wrath and hell, I should be called a child of God,  
Should know, should feel my sins forgiven, Blest with this antepast of heaven!

And shall I slight my Father's love? Or basely fear his gifts to own?  
Unmindful of his favours prove? Shall I, the hallowed cross to shun,  
Refuse his righteousness to impart By hiding it within my heart?

Outcasts, to you, yes you I call, Christ's love invites you to believe!!  
He spreads his arms to embrace you all; Sinners alone his grace receive:  
No need of him the righteous have; He came the lost to seek and save.

Come, O my guilty kindred, come, Groaning beneath your load of sin!  
His bleeding heart shall make you room, His open side shall take you in;  
He calls you now, invites you home: Come, O my guilty kindred, come!

And our Old Testament reading is from the book of the Song Of Songs – a book of the Old Testament that we rarely open in Church, but is one of my favourites. And thank you to my wife Alison for reading the passage for us: Song Of Songs chapter 2, verses 8 to 13

### **Reading: Cant 2:8-13**

Listen! My beloved! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice.

My beloved spoke and said to me, 'Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig-tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.

Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.'

### **Talk – So what is our way forward?**

You may not have been expecting that as a Bible reading – I remember once leading a service, where there was another passage from Song Of Songs set as one of the set readings, and a member of the congregation who had volunteered to read it really had trouble even finishing it; she was so embarrassed at having to read so sexy a reading!

But the point is this: Jesus doesn't want to come into our lives as a slave-driver; somebody who is imposing a whole slew of rules and regulations; controlling; manipulating; we've already seen that would be useless. Jesus wants to come into our hearts, into the depths of our very being, to clean us, to renew us, to give us rebirth, resurrection. And to do that we have to trust him in our hearts, into our lives, more completely even than a lover is trusted; a lover we allow into our bodies and our thoughts; but Jesus we are having to allow into the very foundations of our being, into the very depths of our soul.

## Prerecorded Circuit Service – 29 August 2021

That's a big ask.

But it's easier than it sounds, because already deep within us, deeper even than the foundations of our hearts, there is already a light; a light that lights all of humankind, the light of the Son of God, the light of the God who is love. We already know Jesus, we already know his light; we already know his love; all we need to do is respond to that light, to respond to his love with our love. And yes, we can do that; however polluted, however corrupt our hearts, that light is always there – that love is always there, and we can shine with that love, we can shine with that light, we can let Jesus into our lives.

And then indeed the winter will be past, the rains will be over and gone, and there will be flowers on the earth, and the season of singing will come, and we will smell the scent of the blossoming vines in our hearts and in our world.

So how about it? In the words of the great Jewish rabbi Hillel: if not you, who? If not now, when?

And if you want to begin, or if you want to refresh the commitment you have already made, here are some words to help you do so. Speak the ones you want to speak.

### **Commitment**

God said, 'Let there be light.'

I believe that Jesus is the light in my heart  
that God believes in me, forgives and trusts me,  
even though I make the same mistakes  
over and over again.

I believe that Jesus is the light in the church;  
that God speaks to the world through the church,  
in the Bible, in water and bread and wine, in deeds and words,  
despite our arrogance, pride and selfrighteousness,

I believe that Jesus is the light in the world;  
that God has bought the world back from slavery,  
reopened the gate between earth and heaven,  
that he will wash the world clean, and declare it good.

I commit myself to Jesus,  
and so to my neighbours as sisters and brothers,  
renewing my life, our lives, over and over again.  
I commit myself to asking questions  
to being open to illumination, to living in the light of the Spirit.  
I commit myself to doing what God requires of me  
To act with justice, to love mercy, to walk with Jesus,  
To love God, to love my neighbour, and to love everyone that Jesus loves and died for.  
Amen.

And there really is only one possible hymn to close with. And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood?

### **Hymn StF 345 – And can it be**

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood?  
Died he for me, who caused his pain? For me, who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

## Prerecorded Circuit Service – 29 August 2021

'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies! Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the first-born seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore, let angel minds enquire no more.

He left his Father's throne above— So free, so infinite his grace—  
Emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race.  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free; For, O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray— I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,  
My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine!  
Alive in him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

Well, thank you again for joining with us in worship, whoever, wherever, whenever you are.  
We are delighted to have been here with you.

And let us close by blessing one another in the words of the Grace, saying:

### **The Grace**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore AMEN