



Sunday 7th November 2021

This short act of worship has been prepared for you to use as some cannot meet for worship in our church buildings as per normal. If you are well enough why not spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

Opening words

“Seeing we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses let us look unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith.”

StF 744: ‘Come let us join our friends above’

Sing/ read /pray /proclaim these words or listen to it here [Come Let Us Join Our Friends Above - YouTube](#)

Come, let us join our friends above
who have obtained the prize,
and on the eagle wings of love
to joys celestial rise.

Let saints on earth unite to sing
with those to glory gone,
for all the servants of our King
in earth and heaven are one.

One family we dwell in him,
one church above, beneath,
though now divided by the stream,
the narrow stream of death;
one army of the living God,
to his command we bow;
part of his host have crossed the flood,
and part are crossing now.

Ten thousand to their endless home
this solemn moment fly,
and we are to the margin come,
and we expect to die.
E'en now by faith we join our hands
with those that went before,
and greet the blood-besprinkled bands
on the eternal shore.

Our spirits too shall quickly join,
like theirs with glory crowned,
and shout to see our Captain's sign,
to hear his trumpet sound.
O that we now might grasp our Guide!
O that the word were given!
Come, Lord of Hosts, the waves divide,
and land us all in heaven.

Let us pray together

Loving God, we come into your presence in fellowship with each other and your family from all generations to worship and adore you. Move among us we pray that we may know your presence, acknowledge your might, and gain a view of your eternal kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

In silence let us confess before God our sins, sins which God alone can forgive.

Silence

Forgiving God, accept these prayers and help us to know ourselves forgiven, may we know Jesus' words to be true for each of us, “Your sins are forgiven.”
Amen. Thanks be to God.

A prayer for today

Eternal God, in whose perfect realm no sword is drawn but the sword of justice, and no strength known but the strength of love: guide and inspire all who seek your kingdom, that peoples and nations may find their security in the love which casts out fear; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Martin Luther's hymn *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*

StF 623: ‘A safe stronghold our God is still’

[A Safe Stronghold Our God Is Still \(Westminster Chapel, 1961\) - YouTube](#)

New Testament reading: Hebrews 11:18-23

Gospel reading: Mark 1:14-20

Time to reflect

One of my former churches had a frieze between the sanctuary and the balcony in which illustrations from the Good New Bible were enlarged and coloured in, the

large panels thus giving the appearance that when you stepped into the chapel you were surrounded by “a great cloud of witnesses”. I have also stood in the anti-Chapel of Trinity College Cambridge and been surrounded with statues of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Sir Isaac Newton, illustrious company indeed which has been inspiring. I have also sat in Somerville College Dining Hall Oxford and been surrounded by portraits of what could be described as formidable women (they had to be in my opinion in a male-dominated world) such as Dame Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, Dorothy Hodgkin, and Iris Murdoch, which for me felt more intimidating.

Our picture Gallery in Hebrews 11 is there I ascertain to encourage us, not to put us down. Indeed the Letter to the Hebrews was written to a minority community, to those who faced much persecution in Rome, the place of the Coliseum where Christians were being thrown to the lions. In response the writer pauses on a picture Gallery of Faith... Gideon, David, Samuel etc who enforced justice, received the promises of God, and stopped the mouths of lions. Incredibly we are invited to step into this picture gallery of great heroes of the faith, those who fought the good fight of faith and who in the end inherited the crown of righteousness.

We can often feel despondent by things around us, fightings without and fears within such as the world's affairs; the political, economic, social, environmental situation we find ourselves in; the Church's weaknesses in the midst of all. But we can remind ourselves that we are in good company, that this is the story of the Church for much of the past 2000 years. And so, taking ourselves in hand, any sense of despondency we may have can give way to other more positive moods.

Firstly, *a sense of pride*. Our little life can suddenly receive a new significance in the awareness of being part of such an illustrious company, that we are not on our own! Think of it in this way. Some people join fraternities, clubs, societies, to gain significance. To join the Church on the other hand might seem less significant. Yes anyone can join. Yes it doesn't depend on social standing or status, or wealth.

In the early Christian community there were the slaves, the dispossessed, the ordinary people, the ill-educated, the disfigured, the ill-born, the one-talented, the obscure, what Paul would call “the have nots to set at nought the things that are.” What does the Hebrew writer do? He looks back over history and says, “Step into this Gallery, where you can feel part of a great company both past and present including prophets, apostles, martyrs, kings such as Moses and David; Isaiah and Jeremiah.” We could add St John and St Paul; Ignatius and Polycarp; St Augustine of Hippo and St Francis of Assisi; Martin Luther and John Wesley; William Carey and William Wilberforce. But think of ill-educated people like John Bunyan the tinker, William Carey the cobbler, William Booth the pawnbroker assistant. Think of ill-born like George Whitefield the inn-keeper's son here in Gloucester, Alexander Whyte of Kirriemuir. Think of disfigured people like Henry Martyn who had warts and stammered, Whitefield who had a squint, Fanny Crosby who was blind. Think of obscure people, the nameless ones, like the farm-labourer who rescued Wesley from the flames at the Epworth vicarage when but a child; or the simple preacher who on a snowy morning in Colchester in a little Primitive Methodist chapel and in a stammering way pointed the teenage boy C.H. Spurgeon to Christ.

We are in such an illustrious company, a really great club, a fraternity that spans the centuries and encircles the globe, which includes distinguished and lesser-known people. Yes, “We are fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of faith.” We can step in and out of this Gallery with our heads held high no matter what others may think or how circumstances might try to dictate things.

Secondly, this sense of rightful pride should be tempered with *a mood of humility*. Albert Einstein had a picture of James Clark Maxwell (who discovered the electro-magnetic field) above his desk once said—“Many times a day I realise how much my own inner and outer life are based upon the labours of my fellow-men, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself to give in return as much as I have received.” Karl Barth played Mozart's *Magic Flute* before getting down to his writings every day once wrote

this letter to his hero, "What I want to thank you for is simply this: whenever I listen to you, I am transported to the threshold of a world which in sunlight and shadow, by day and by night, it is a good and ordered world."

Moreover, St Bernard of Chartres said, "We are dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants", meaning we discover truth by building on previous discoveries." To which Isaac Newton would add, "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

We enter into others labours—it is not all about us and our insights; we are lifted up by their efforts and it is only this that helps us to see further than perhaps before.

Think of British politicians who made a difference in the nineteenth-century – William Wilberforce, the 7th Earl of Shaftsbury, Josephine Butler—they were each evangelical in heart and mind whose faith was the mainspring of their lives, what Wilberforce called "true Christians who knew what it was to practice saintliness in daily life and by whom the minutest details of action were considered with reference to eternity." These people helped bring about a multitude of reforms including the abolition of the slave-trade, the limitation of child labour, and the raising of female consent to sixteen when young English girls were being trafficked across the English Channel. The word 'saints' was hurled at them in Parliament as a term of abuse, like the name 'Methodist' to the Holy Club members in Oxford, but they were saints, not perfect people, but true disciples of Jesus Christ.

These are some of our spiritual ancestors, and some have just passed into eternity during the course of the pandemic. We enter into their labours, we are dwarfs perched on their shoulders.

Thirdly in this gallery we can have a *sense of hope, of infinite encouragement*. We are surrounded by these portraits from the past and present, and in that hushed and holy atmosphere we can almost hear them ask, "Are you really one of us?" "Do you belong to our company so that one day your portrait will also hang here with us, or have you come simply to watch and admire, a passing stranger as it were?" In their presence we can drop our heads in humility. We didn't start this thing, we are only taking up the fight they left off.

We might say, "The struggle is much more intense today than ever before." But they might say, "We stand before the throne of God now but we once struggled like you do, we knew the stress and the strain of life on earth. And we are not here to judge but to encourage."

I close with this story. There was once a Congregational minister who often wore elaborate clerical vestments which often shocked the Puritan conscience of his Free Church brothers. On one occasion he was preaching in a Methodist Church south of the river Thames wearing fancy shoe-buckles. When mocked at, he said they had once belonged to John Wesley himself. The story was this. Wesley had cut off his buckles and given them to a family and given them to a family as a gesture. They had been passed down the family as a valued heirloom but got separated when one part of the family had gone to the America. The minister had married into the family back in England and having got one buckle asked if the other could be returned to reunite them again. He had then got the buckles stitched on to new shoes and so whenever he went preaching said, "If I can't wear a prophet's mantle, at least I can wear the buckles of his shoes!"

We may not have a tangible article of a spiritual hero from the past such as the chain that bound Paul to the prison cell, the ink well that Luther threw at the devil, or the Greek lexicon that Carey propped up on his cobbler bench when preparing to become a missionary. But we can hear these past voices in a much deeper sense. Before the throne of God they pray for us. If we hush our murmurings and stand very still in the picture gallery, we can hear them speak across the centuries through a thin wall that separates time from eternity. What do they say to us? "Don't give up. Don't lose heart. Yes your earthly pilgrimage can be hard and difficulty, the cross may feel burdensome. But you can still finish your course with joy knowing there is a crown that is waiting for you, incorruptible and kept in heaven for you." Let us therefore feel a rightful sense of pride tempered with humility and be encouraged in their presence. Amen.

Take time to sit quietly and meditate

StF 706: 'O Jesus I have promised'

Sing/ read /pray /proclaim these words or listen to it here [O Jesus I have promised - YouTube](#)

A time of prayer

Let us pray.

Creator God, we bring before you the concerns of our hearts and of the world around us.

Silence

We pray for your people on earth and in glory that all humanity may be one in peace, love and mutual respect.

Silence

We pray for unity within your church, that we may all meet you and each other in love, and not use your name to divide and separate us. May we rejoice in you, knowing that you take pleasure in us.

Silence

We pray for our homes and families, for those who are close at hand and those who are far away. Lord unite us in your love.

Silence

We pray with your people on earth and in glory that your kingdom may come and your will be done, through the working of your Holy Spirit building your Church in strength and unity.

All our prayers we offer in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray as we say 'Our Father...'

Listen to **StF 706**: '*Longing for light, we wait in darkness*' or sing a verse of a hymn that comes to mind [Longing for Light, We Wait in Darkness \(Christ be Our Light: 5vv+refrain\) \[lyrics for congregations\] - YouTube](#)

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.

*Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.*

Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has pow'r to save us.
Make us your living voice.

Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed.

Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
walls made of living stone.

Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your kingdom come.

A closing blessing

*Glory to God, and praise and love
Be ever, ever given,
By saints below, and saints above
The church in earth and heaven.*

God our Creator,
Jesus our Redeemer,
Holy Spirit our Sustainer,
hold us in your love,
that we may serve you in all we say or
think or do,
today and always.
Amen.

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