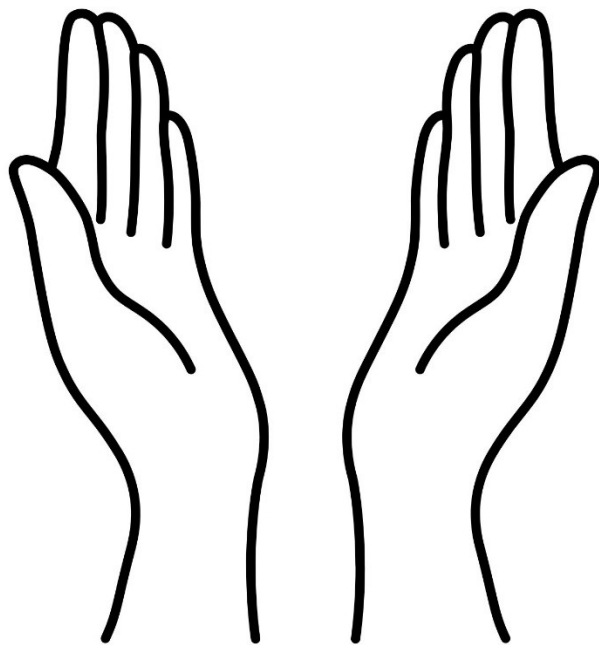


A Month of Sundays

April 2024



Preston Ribble Circuit

Ministry Team

Sunday 7th April 2024

Call to worship

Generous God, who shares our life,
pouring out the Spirit of Jesus,
open our hearts and hands to reach out
to one another, and to those we live or work among
in caring and service, love and compassion.

Amen.

Bible reading: Acts 4:32-35

The Believers Share Their Possessions

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Hymn Stf 611: Brother, sister, let me serve you

1 Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you ;
pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant too.

2 We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road ;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

3 I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear ;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

4 I will weep when you are weeping ;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you ;
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.

5 When we sing to God in heaven
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.

6 Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you ;
pray that I may have the grace
to let you be my servant too.

Richard A. M. Gillard (b. 1953)

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Prayers of intercession

Eternal, Everlasting God you are eternally patient with us, and no matter what we do, you persevere with us. Help each of us to show patience and perseverance with others; and with this prayer in our hearts and on our lips, we pray for those we know and love and hear of this day.

God, in whom we believe:

Bless them.

For those without meaning and purpose in their lives, who wake to the morning light and dread the empty day that lies ahead; for those who dread the dark nights of wakefulness, tossing and turning; for those who feel there is no hope for tomorrow, no vision for the future, no plan for their lives; for those without a stable home life, without meaningful work and prospects.

God, in whom we believe:

Bless them.

For those without the shelter of a home, with no roots to a place, who are constantly forced to move on, change direction through war or violence, political unrest, prejudice, religious hatred and so much more; for those who seek refuge in new places and new lands with new languages and new 'norms'.

God, in whom we believe:

Bless them.

For those who are victims of modern slavery, who are all but imprisoned, abused, made to feel worthless, undervalued, inhuman, who are frightened and bewildered and a long way from home, family and support.

God, in whom we believe:

Bless them.

For those areas in our country where unrest and unhappiness with government plans or police tactics or religious divides bring people out onto the streets in protest. For those who want to peacefully make their stand but who are overtaken by the violent few who 'up the anti' and go armed for violence; for those who perpetrate the unrest that they may be helped to see that violence is not the answer and will often only fuel more problems; for those who make plans and laws and those who need to police society – may they and we seek unity, purpose and love.

God, in whom we believe:

Bless them.

And for ourselves we pray, that we might banish shadows that hold us back and keep us fixed to what we are familiar with, even the new familiar, when we can be afraid to step out, step on, step forward, step up – we pray that we might know the wisdom of the psalmist, the grace of God, the blessing of the Spirit, the love and companionship of each other and the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

These are our prayers this day.

Amen.

Reflection

In Edith Nesbit's *The Railway Children*, Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis discover that the station porter, Mr Perks, who has always been extremely helpful, is going to have a birthday but wasn't in the habit of celebrating it. The children decide that they ought to do something

special and ask the villagers to join in. So, they arrange a party and presents. However, Perks is affronted thinking it is 'charity'. It takes all Bobbie's and Mrs Perks' tact and diplomacy to show that the gifts and the party were not intended to show up Perk's inability to provide, but a genuine thank you from the whole community for all that Perks did and was. The story shows that generosity also includes showing sensitivity toward those whom you want to help.

Helping those in need was a fundamental part of Judaism in the time of Jesus. There was no pension or benefit system. However, giving could be done, and sadly often was, in a way that focused more on the generosity of the giver – as Jesus pointed out on a few occasions. In Acts, we see that what marked out that early Christian community was a generous lifestyle. They encouraged one another, shared with one another, prayed together, learnt together and supported those in need. Of course, they weren't perfect, but they realised they were meant to be a community that was open to others.

This is a challenge to us today. One church had a motto 'no eating, no meeting!' It was difficult to fulfil at times, and much more difficult during Covid and even afterwards. However, it does point out a deficiency in churches today that are agenda-driven rather than fellowship orientated. People matter more than programmes; we need to get to know one another, to love and care for one another as well as to continue in the apostles' teaching and prayers. Are changes needed to our church to make it more than a weekly spiritual filling station, but a genuine home where strangers are welcomed, and members experience a sense of family even if they live alone? Given that our context is very different from that described in Acts, how might we foster generosity in our attitudes and behaviour within and beyond our fellowship?

Say the Lord's Prayer

A sending out prayer

Lord, your generous love was showered upon us in Jesus.
Help us to be generous to those among whom we live or meet.
Guide us in building and becoming a generous community,
as we seek to put our faith into action.
We ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake.

Amen.

Sunday 14th April 2024

Call to worship

Come, all who have made mistakes.
Come, all who have said or done things they regret.
Come, all who have failed to do what was right.
Come, all who want to start afresh.
Come to the God who offers hope, healing, and forgiveness.

Bible reading: Acts 3:12-19

¹²When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? ¹³The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. ¹⁴You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. ¹⁶By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

¹⁷“Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. ¹⁸But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

Reflection

In *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* by Charlie Mackesy, the mole remarks that the greatest illusion is that life should be perfect. By way of illustration, Charlie Mackesy includes the page from his manuscript ‘marred’ by a paw print from his dog. We are far from perfect. All of us make mistakes. Some of them are minor. Ask the congregation to share any mistakes they have made recently. It is important that we understand that not all mistakes are sins, nor should we feel guilty after

them. Some are necessary and even positive in order to learn or gain experience. The inventor Thomas Edison made thousands of ‘mistakes’ before he came up with a working light bulb. Few of us learn how to ride a bike or drive a car safely the first time; we have to have a number of goes, sometimes a lot!

In her insightful book *Failure*, Emma Ineson records a story that exposes a common misunderstanding of the nature of the failure that the Bible calls sin. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was the speaker at a church gathering where he declared he was a sinner. ‘Well,’ responded an outraged woman in the audience, ‘if I had known that you were a sinner I wouldn’t have bothered to come today!’ and stalked off in high dudgeon. She made the error of imagining that because someone had attained importance in the Christian church, he or she could not possibly be a sinner.

The truth is, however, that all of us are sinners and have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). It is what we do when we own this truth that is the crucial thing. Peter makes this point in this week’s passage from Acts. His audience had committed a very serious mistake in not recognising who Jesus really was; it took him to the cross. However, by coming clean about this, through confessing that they had done wrong opens the way to forgiveness. They had acted in ignorance along with their rulers. That’s the bad news. And it is bad news for us too. Our failure takes God to the cross. But, here’s the good news: by recognising our failure to live as God desires and turning to him brings us forgiveness and the restoration of that relationship brings new life. Then we can experience ‘the incredible forgetfulness of God’ to use a striking phrase by Emma Ineson. God does not remember or hold against us the sins that we have truly confessed. He offers us a fresh start, a new beginning that will bring joy.

Hymn StF 440: Amazing Grace

- 1 Amazing grace — how sweet the sound —
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

- 2 God's grace has taught my heart to fear,
his grace my fears relieved ;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed !
- 3 Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come ;
God's grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.
- 4 The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures ;
he will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.
- 5 And, when this heart and flesh shall fail
and mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil
a life of joy and peace.
- 6 When we've been there ten thousand years
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we first begun.

John Newton (1725–1807) (*alt.*)

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Prayers of intercession

Response after each line: We pray to you, O Lord.

Let us bring before God
those who have never known the transformative power of love: those
who live in fear of what others may do to them:
those who have the strength to stand up to that which is wrong:
those who have the courage and the opportunity to speak out against
injustice:
those who give of themselves to help those in need:
those who work to make this world a better place:
those known to us who need our prayers at this time:
Amen.

A prayer of confession

Almighty God, we read the stories of old, of psalmists and prophets, of disciples and apostles, of followers and onlookers, and ask ourselves 'Why did they do that, why did they make so many mistakes, why did they do bad things, wrong things?' Help us to see that we too do things that are wrong, that are not good or right. Help us to see that we make mistakes, take wrong decisions because they somehow seemed the easiest things to do at the time. As you have forgiven those of old, so too, when we confess our failings, when we look at what we have really done and seen what we could have done better, you forgive us, you cleanse us and set us free. **Amen.**

Say the Lord's Prayer

A sending out prayer

Lord, thank you that you don't give up on us when we fail,
that you offer us a fresh start through your forgiveness.
Guide and teach us that we may learn from our mistakes,
And walk with us into each new day,
In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Sunday 21st April 2024

A gathering prayer

Come, everyone, to Christ the cornerstone.
Come to the one who gives resources to build the kingdom.
God invites you, and empowers you with the Spirit.
So come and worship Jesus, beloved Son of the Father.

Hymn Stf 434: Rock of ages

- 1 Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee ;
let the water and the blood,
from thy riven side which flowed,
be of sin the double cure,
cleanse me from its guilt and power.

- 2 Not the labours of my hands
can fulfil thy law's demands ;
could my zeal no respite know,
could my tears for ever flow,
all for sin could not atone :
thou must save, and thou alone.

- 3 Nothing in my hand I bring,
simply to thy cross I cling ;
naked, come to thee for dress ;
helpless, look to thee for grace ;
foul, I to the fountain fly ;
wash me, Saviour, or I die.

- 4 While I draw this fleeting breath,
when mine eyes shall close in death,
when I soar through tracts unknown,
see thee on thy judgement throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee.

Augustus Montague Toplady (1740–1778)

Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number 434 .

A prayer of thanksgiving

We give thanks, O God, that on your firm foundation we can build our lives, live our lives, find purpose and meaning, stability and peace. We give thanks that with you as our rock, our cornerstone, we can navigate the tussles and troubles of the world, not avoiding them, but making sense of them and doing all we can to make lives better. We give thanks that our faith in you steadies us when we are surrounded by false truths, greedy ways, or power-grabbing leaders who have no thought for anyone but themselves. For your promises and firm foundation, we give thanks.
Amen.

Say the Lord's Prayer

Bible readings: Acts 4:5-12

⁵The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. ⁶Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. ⁷They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹Jesus is

"the stone you builders rejected,
which has become the cornerstone.'

¹²Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

Reflection

During a famous interview in 1966, John Lennon of The Beatles fame remarked that: 'We (The Beatles) are more popular than Jesus'. Despite the predictable outrage, he was probably right as far as Western culture

was concerned. Their influence was prodigious, affecting music, fashion and hairstyles and spawning a host of imitators, such as The Monkees. Many young men who lived in that era sported Beatle haircuts and wore sharp suits, unless they favoured the Rolling Stones! Today social media influencers such as Justin Bieber or Ariana Grande, with many millions of followers, wield considerable power when they recommend a particular brand or lifestyle. As a result, they are courted by market brands. Hands up, if you dare admit to being influenced by a celebrity in your choice of shampoo or deodorant!

However, we are less likely to be influenced when it comes to changing our core values or moral behaviour simply because a view is promoted by a celebrity or by media exposure. Many will probably demand a higher standard than simply 'X's' say so. We look for authenticity. Does their life ring true? Clever marketing may hide their secrets, but not indefinitely.

And the same is true of us. If we want to commend our faith, we must be exposed to another's inspection as Peter was. He did not pretend that he had the power to heal – that came from someone else, and the 'evidence' stood by his side in the dock. His opponents had no answer for the truth who literally stared them in the face. They were left with an impossible dilemma: if Peter was right about the healing, then it lent authenticity to his claim that Jesus rose from the dead and they were in the wrong. They may have had the power to arrest, but they had no power over the truth.

We may think we have little power or influence but what of that we have within our relationships, our school, college or workplace or among the groups to which we belong? There are more people inspecting us than we imagine. If we are honest and do not pretend to holiness we don't possess, but live out our lives as those who seek to follow Jesus, then others will notice. We may not have the gifts and tools of professional influencers, but if we witness to, and live out the truth of Jesus, then we will not be without power or influence – for the same Jesus that was with Peter and later disciples such as Francis of Assisi will be with us.

Prayers of intercession

We pray for the lost sheep of this world:

for politicians striving to hang onto power and influence,
for leaders of the nations who have forgotten to serve the common good.

We pray for the lost sheep of this world:

for those who follow the fashions and frivolities of today at the expense
of tomorrow,
for those who get swept along by the crowd on tides of prejudice and
easy judgements.

We pray for the lost sheep of this world:

for those who wander off on their own, to escape from reality,
for those who are led astray, away from safety and well-being.
We pray for the lost sheep of this world:

for those who take what they have for granted,
for those who are unable to give thanks for the things they have.
Amen.

A sending out prayer

God, our heavenly father,
send us out in the power of your Spirit,
to build on the cornerstone of our faith,
Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.
Amen.

Sunday 28th April 2024

A gathering prayer

God of our journey, guide our path, and make us ready in our encounters with others to learn new things about you – for you are the God of surprises.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Bible reading: Acts 8:26-40

Philip and the Ethiopian

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” ³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. ³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶ As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?” ^[37] ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both

Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Reflection

A schoolboy was very upset when his father, for economic reasons, stopped him travelling by train to school because he could get a free bus pass. Little did he know that one of the schoolgirls he befriended on those bus journeys would later become his wife! Sometimes something quite ordinary can change our lives completely. At the time it didn't appear to be a nudge by the Spirit as happened to Philip in our Acts reading. However, in retrospect, both saw the hand of God at work. We do not know what a journey can bring us or who we will meet that will profoundly affect our life and purpose. Perhaps this will encourage us to pray before we set out on a journey – not simply for safety in our travels, but for those whom we might meet on the way.

Perhaps one of the most famous stories is of an invitation to Billy, a young farm boy, to drive a vegetable truck packed with youth to a tent crusade. He joined the others inside and the evangelist made such an impression that Billy felt called to become an evangelist, even though he had had very little formal education. Little did he know that he – Billy Graham – would preach to millions, including presidents and world leaders, and many churches would be reinvigorated by those who responded to his call to get out of their seats and come up front.

Probably our own encounters will not be so dramatic as that, but you never know what the God of surprises has in store for you. However, if the journey we take this week will forge a new friendship, give you fresh insight through a chance conversation, or simply bring solace or hope to a lonely person, that journey will have been worthwhile.

Prayer of adoration

Your love, O God, is for all people no matter where they are from or where they live. Your love accompanies us on our journey through life, through the good and the bad, happy and sad times and all the times

between them. Your love is with us on the mountaintop and in the valley, on roads rough and smooth. You are our sustenance, our guide, our teacher and our friend. For all of this and so much more, we adore you. **Amen.**

Hymn StF 385: Holy Spirit, we welcome you

- 1 Holy Spirit, we welcome you,
Holy Spirit, we welcome you!
Move among us with holy fire
as we lay aside all earthly desire,
hands reach out and our hearts aspire.
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit,
Holy Spirit, we welcome you!

- 2 Holy Spirit, we welcome you,
Holy Spirit, we welcome you!
Let the breeze of your presence blow
that your children here might truly know
how to move in the Spirit's flow.
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit,
Holy Spirit, we welcome you!

- 3 Holy Spirit, we welcome you,
Holy Spirit, we welcome you!
Please accomplish in us today
some new work of loving grace, we pray —
unreservedly — have your way.
Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit,
Holy Spirit, we welcome you!

Christopher Alan Bowater (b.1947)

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Prayers of intercession

To all those in need of love:
let the love of God be known.
To a world in need of love:
let the love of God be shown.
To those in need of food:

let the love of God be shared.

By those in need of healing:

let the love of God be experienced.

By those in need of peace:

let the love of God be felt.

By those in need of hope:

let the love of God be seen.

To those in need of joy:

let the love of God be sung.

By those in need of justice:

let the love of God be heard.

By all those in need of love:

let the love of God be known.

Amen.

A prayer of confession

We come in penitence for journeys not shared with those who needed companionship. We come in sorrow for not walking with and talking with those who needed us most. We come in sadness that we have let ourselves and others down, and let you down when we have not accompanied those who have been searching for you. There are times when we could have done more. We confess our failings and seek forgiveness, as we seek also to forgive those who have not walked with us because the burden was too heavy for them as well. In penitence we seek forgiveness. Lord, hear our prayer.

Amen.

Say the Lord's Prayer

A sending out prayer

Lord, be with us on our journeys with others and open our eyes to you.
Amen.