

A Month of Sundays January 2025

All Things New



Behold, I am making all things new. Revelation 21:5

Preston Ribble Circuit

Sunday 5th January 2025

Call to worship

The nights are still long.

The mornings are cold.

The baubles are packed in their boxes.

The cards are recycled. The walls are bare.

New diaries are yet to be written,

blank calendars marked

with the challenges of the coming year.

Let us give thanks that we do not face them alone,

that God's promise has been fulfilled,

that one lives among us

who is full of grace and truth.

Bible reading

Ephesians 1: 3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also

obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Hymn Singing the Faith number 440

- 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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number 440

Reflection

Our theme for the week is 'a promise made real'. From the earliest times, the followers of Jesus have seen him as the fulfilment of promises made in the Jewish scriptures that God would send a saviour to the world. In that sense his birth makes those promises 'real'. And that is something to celebrate. Too many promises never become reality in any sense. It remains to be seen how many promises made during the General Election prove to have any kind of reality. However, God's promised gift arriving at the first Christmas was not the end of the story, any more than an election win delivers manifesto pledges. It was the beginning of a tale told in the rest of the Gospel accounts.

Our Gospel reading sums it up succinctly – as a prologue to a great drama should – 'The light shines in the darkness' and 'He was in the world ... yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.' Some translations of the ending of verse five say the darkness did not 'comprehend' the light. There was much more work for Jesus to do, and for the Church to do today in making the promise of salvation fully real to the world.

A decisive moment like the birth of Jesus can start the process, but there's a lot more to do and it's only right that this should be clearly stated and that those who wish to see a promise made real should recognise the work involved. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells those who want to be his followers, 'But don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it?' (Luke 14:28, New Living Translation). Jesus came as a baby, and the arrival of a baby is celebrated as the fulfilment of nine months of promise. But the reality entails sleepless nights, nappies, teething and tantrums before you even get to first base in the long journey of nurturing a young life to its fulfilment. The baby Jesus had a difficult journey to travel before the promise he embodied achieved its full reality. And we have work to do in making that promise comprehensible and 'real' to the world in our time.

A prayer of praise

Almighty God, praise be to you.
We give you thanks for the blessings you have poured out upon us,
for the difference you have made to our lives.
For gifts beyond measure: not the gold, frankincense and myrrh
the wise men brought to Jesus at Epiphany,
but gifts of forgiveness way beyond what we deserve,
for love everlasting, light in our darkness and hope in our despair.
Almighty God, **praise be to you.**

We give thanks for the constancy of your being, eternal, unchanging, reliable and secure, which grounds us when life around us seems constantly in flux.

Almighty God, **praise be to you.**

We give thanks for the glimpses we catch of you unexpectedly

as we go about our daily living.

Glimpses in the light and in the dark.

Glimpses that uphold and sustain us.

Almighty God, **praise be to you.**

Amen.

Say the Lord's Prayer

A sending out prayer

As we savour the presents of Christmas and begin to make them part of our lives – things to use, to wear, to play with – so may we savour and use the blessings we have unwrapped in the gift of Jesus,
and make his promise real in our lives.

Amen.

Sunday 12th January 2025

Call to worship

Jesus said,
'Come to me all you who are weary and burdened.'
So let us come to him now
with the weariness of our return to everyday life,
and the burdens of the year ahead.
Let us put them and ourselves
into his strong arms,
so that he can lower us into the waters
and raise us, cleansed and refreshed.

Bible reading: Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily

form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Reflection

'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' What had Jesus done to merit this praise from God at the end of today's Gospel reading? If you look at the reading, you will see that these words come in the middle of the third chapter of Luke's story of Jesus' life. In the first two chapters, Jesus is either not yet born, a baby, or a 12-year-old staying too long in the Temple.

The first part of chapter three is about John the Baptist. The first appearance of the adult Jesus is in verse 21 where he presents himself for baptism and prays. In the following verse he receives God's loving approval. It seems as if he is being applauded for just being there and for being who he is. We don't often think of Jesus as having feelings, but if he was fully human then he must have done. It's part of human nature to have anxieties and doubts and to need support and encouragement, especially when facing challenges. The baptism scene marks the beginning of Jesus' public profile. In the next chapter he will go three rounds with the devil in the wilderness, and then the long journey to Calvary and the Easter tomb will begin, with many more rounds to fight. He surely had the wisdom to know what was coming. And he must have been anxious. God's words of support and love must have done wonders for his self-confidence.

We know the strength we can draw from positive comments – especially those that value us just for being who we are. In a world that values achievement, it can be an enormous relief and encouragement to be told that we are loved for who we are – not for how we look, our exam results, how much we're paid, what designer clothes we can afford. I wonder how Jesus would have scored on his achievements: he seems to have given up a decent job to roam the countryside depending on handouts; he angered the authorities, and his local community wanted to throw him over a cliff; he got himself arrested and executed. Not much of a CV. Oh, and he healed a few people, but he kept doing it when he wasn't supposed to; and he taught, but his lessons were subversive. I wonder what social media would have made of him. The kind of social media stories that usually make the headlines today underline its potential for crushing judgementalism. However, social media also gives opportunities for the kind of unconditional positive regard that God gives to Jesus by the waters of the Jordan. An oppressed community was gathered at the waters and Jesus showed his solidarity with them. Social media gives great opportunities for supportive communities to form round those who find themselves in turbulent waters – for people to be there for each other, to be pleased with each other, and to say that they are loved just for being who they are.

Hymn Stf 377

- 1 Down the mountain the river flows,
and it brings refreshment wherever it goes.
Through the valleys and over the fields,
the river is rushing and the river is here.
*The river of God sets our feet a-dancing,
the river of God fills our hearts with cheer;
the river of God fills our mouths with laughter,
and we rejoice for the river is here.*
- 2 The river of God is teeming with life,
and all who touch it can be revived.
And those who linger on this river's shore
will come back thirsting for more of the Lord.
- 3 Up to the mountain we love to go
to find the presence of the Lord.
Along the banks of the river we run,
we dance with laughter, giving praise to the Son.

Andy Park, Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition,
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A prayer of adoration

Epiphany God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we adore you.
Parent (Father) God, you care for us, tend to our wounds
and swaddle us with love:

we adore you.

Lord Jesus Christ, you were born for us, lived for us,
suffered for us, died for us, raised for us:

we adore you.

Holy Spirit, you were poured out upon us at baptism and beyond, poured out for our blessing and our faith:

we adore you.

Epiphany God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, **we adore you.**

Amen.

Say the Lord's Prayer

A sending out prayer

Blow up a pair of water wings, put them on and hold out your arms, saying:

Father, fill our water wings
with the breath of the Spirit,
so that holding the hand of your Son
we may be supported
through the waters of this week.

Amen.

Sunday 19th January 2025

A call to worship

As we receive, so may we give:
to the God who loves us,
let us give our love;
to the God who pours out his heart for us,
let us pour out our hearts in worship.

Hymn Stf 82

- 1 O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder
consider all the works thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed:
*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee:
how great thou art, how great thou art!*
*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee:
how great thou art, how great thou art!*
- 2 When through the woods and forest glades I wander
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
and hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze:
- 3 And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
sent him to die, I scarce can take it in
that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
he bled and died to take away my sin:
- 4 When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
and take me home — what joy shall fill my heart;

then shall I bow in humble adoration,
and there proclaim: my God, how great thou art:

Stuart K. Hine (1899–1989)

vv. 1, 2, 4 based on *O store Gud* 1885 by

Carl Gustaf Boberg (1859–1940)

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A prayer of adoration

God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
we marvel at all you have been through the generations,
all you are to us now and all we trust you will be in the
future.

As your Word unfolds, we find ourselves kneeling before
you in body, mind and spirit, in awe of your goodness and
majesty.

We stand in awe of the way your Spirit transforms and
transports us.

God Almighty, we adore you.

Amen.

Say the Lord's Prayer

Bible reading: Psalm 36: 5-10

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgements are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!

All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.

O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your salvation to the upright of heart!

Reflection

Have you ever had to organise a wedding or other large celebration – a big anniversary, a retirement do or an award presentation? I wonder what quantity of beverages you had to order? Or, if you have never had that duty, I wonder what volume was consumed at the last wedding reception or celebration you attended? In the well-known Gospel story of the Wedding at Cana it is possible to miss the sheer volume of extra wine created by transforming the six jars full of water. We are told each stone jar held 20 or 30 gallons, which equates to 91 to 136 litres, or 160 to 240 pints. It all adds up to Jesus going above and beyond the call of duty – and it wasn't even his duty to watch over the wine supply! We are told by the Gospel writer that the miracle at Cana was the first of Jesus' 'signs' – demonstrations of his nature – and it tells us something very important about him. It is surely significant that top of the list of these signs was one indicating Jesus' abundant generosity of spirit.

We believe that in Jesus we also learn about the nature of God. And today's reading from Psalm 36 gives us extravagant metaphors for God's overflowing abundance, high as the heavens, towering like a mountain, deep as the ocean, flowing like a river, gushing like an inexhaustible fountain. These natural images, and the assurance that God saves 'humans and animals alike' makes us think of the abundant riches of creation.

As stewards of the earth we have a responsibility only to take what we need – to make sure our consumption is sustainable. And those with official responsibilities for provision and distribution must make sure that the resources God has given are made available, not hoarded, and that they are shared out fairly and equally. Sadly, that is far from the case at the moment – our stewardship is failing. However, we can take heart that the failings of the steward at Cana were put right by Jesus. God provides more than enough for the world's needs, and with God's help the failing feast may yet be restored.

A prayer of intercession

This prayer was originally published in 2022.

Lord, we pray that your transforming power will be released,

enabling the power of love to prevail:

into places where people live in fear of the bullet and the bomb,

where basic human rights are ignored,

where people are trafficked or treated as slaves.

As you turned water into wine, transform hatred into love.

Lord, we pray that your transforming power will be released,

enabling the power of love to prevail:

into places where women and men are bitter because of perceived wrongs of the past,

where jobs are hard to find even when sentences have been served,

where there is no such thing as a fresh start.

As you turned water into wine, transform injury through pardon.

Lord, we pray that your transforming power will be released,

enabling the power of love to prevail:

into situations of mistrust and insecurity,

where people do not know who or what to believe,

where fake news is rife and lying is an acceptable norm.

As you turned water into wine, transform doubt into truth.

Lord, we pray that your transforming power will be released,

enabling the power of love to prevail:

where people see no way of paying off their debts,

where queueing at the food bank is all the future seems to hold,

where homes or jobs seem nothing more than a distant dream.

As you turned water into wine, transform despair into hope.

Lord, we pray that your transforming power will be released,

enabling the power of love to prevail:

Use us, Lord, to bring understanding, consolation and love,

strong in the assurance that it is in giving that we receive,

in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and in dying that we are born to eternal life.
As you turned water into wine, transform us into your
disciples, agents of change in a broken world.
Amen.

A sending out prayer

At the wedding at Cana,
Mary saw there was a problem.
She told Jesus about it and he responded
with unexpectedly abundant generosity.
May we have eyes that see the needs of others,
a faith that expects Jesus to help,
and the confidence to pester him in prayer.
Amen.

Sunday 26th January 2025

Call to Worship

Jesus, you came to bring good news to all,
help us to listen to you.
Jesus, you came to release the captives,
help us to follow your example.
Jesus, you came to release the oppressed,
help us to walk in your ways.
Amen.

A gathering prayer

Loving God,
thank you that all are welcome in your presence
and all have a part to play.
Speak to us today and show us how to live
as the body of Christ in this community,
bringing good news to all.

Amen.

Bible reading:

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the

head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Reflection

'Strivers versus skivers' is a political phrase that is sometimes used to try to separate out those who are believed to be contributing to society in the UK from those who are regarded as a burden on it. It echoes a wider trend in our society that values people according to what they do. A church leader in London tells a story about a member called Erin who suffers from chronic pain, uses a wheelchair and is not able to speak so uses a text-to-speech device to communicate. Erin has many stories of how she has been

wheeled out of someone else's way or spoken to loudly and slowly as if she were deaf. For several years, Erin planned all of the children's work at this church, producing craft materials, story ideas and ways of praying for the different services every Sunday. When Covid hit, Erin organised a kids' church session online, planning activities, games and prayers for someone else to lead. Yet very sadly, despite producing all of this, Erin was not valued by the wider congregation because she wasn't seen at the front of church. Ultimately, the pain and frustration of this lack of recognition caused Erin to step back from her work and ultimately from worshipping regularly with that congregation.

In churches we can think that the ongoing running of the church is the most important thing and that can cause us to value the people who can fill certain jobs more than others. In the passage from Corinthians, Paul's words speak of giving honour to those parts of the body that seem weaker. Certainly, if we believe that Jesus came to save everybody and that all have a place in God's kingdom, it follows that God might have gifts for the church in people that have been overlooked up until now. Are we open to seeing God work through every person in our church? Do we value people for who they are and what we see of Jesus in them or only for what they are able to do? If the Church is to reflect Jesus to the world around it, we need to show that all are loved and needed. This is the good news for everybody.

Hymn: Bind us together

Bind us together, Lord
Bind us together
With cords that cannot be broken
Bind us together, Lord
Bind us together
Bind us together in Love

There is only one God,
There is only one King
There is only one Body,
That is why we sing.

Fit for the glory of God,
Purchased by His precious Blood
Born with the right to be free
Jesus the victory has won.

We are the family of God
We are the promise divine
We are God's chosen desire
We are the glorious new wine.

Words: Bob Gillwan (1977)

Music: Bob Gillwan (1977)

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A prayer of thanksgiving

We give thanks, O God, for the magnificence of your
creation,
its vibrant diversity, its provision for us.

We give thanks for the rich cultures of the world
and all they add to the mix of life.
We give thanks for each other,
with all our differences and quirky ways.
We give thanks for your recorded Word through the ages.
We give thanks for the life of Jesus, supreme example to
us
of the outworking of your love.
We give thanks for the outpouring of your Holy Spirit
to comfort, warm and guide us.
We give thanks for all this good news,
in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Say the Lord's Prayer

A sending out prayer

Lord Jesus, you were anointed to bring new sight,
freedom and good news to all people.
Help us to share this good news of your love and care
with everyone we meet in the week ahead.
Amen.