

'God so Loved the world...'

Call to Worship: -

For God so loved the world . . . **That God gave us Jesus, the only Son.**

So that everyone who believes . . . **May not perish but have eternal life.**

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world . . . **But in order that the world might be saved through him.**

God so loved the world . . . **God loves us all, and God offers us new life in Christ.**

Come, let us follow Christ, the only Son, the Messiah. Amen.

Hymn: - STF 346 – Christ is the Lord's Light

1 Christ is the world's light, Christ and none other;
born in our darkness, he became our brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:
glory to God on high.

2 Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;
no one can serve him and despise another;
who else unites us, one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high.

3 Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none other;
sold once for silver, murdered here, our brother
—
he, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:
glory to God on high.

4 Give God the glory, God and none other;
give God the glory, Spirit, Son, and Father;
give God the glory, God with us, my brother:
glory to God on high.

Fred Pratt Green (1903–2000)

Prayers: -

When I look up at the ancient mountains their huge strength steadies my trembling. Their strength is from God who spun the galaxies and shaped this planet our home. We can never stumble out of God's care, for this Lover never falls asleep. The One who looks after us is awake, always alert to the children's cries. Our God utterly cares for us, closer than our right hand. Even the fiery sun will not harm us, nor the face of the moon beguile us. God will keep us going in the hard times, treasuring our inmost being. Whenever you leave for work in the morning, or return home weary at evening, your God will be always there for you, this very day and forever.

Prayer of Confession: -

Let us pray. **Lord, you are steadfast in your love and infinite in your mercy; you welcome sinners and invite them to be your guests. We confess our sins, trusting in you to forgive us.** *Silence*

We have yielded to temptation and sinned: Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

We have turned from our neighbours in their need: Christ, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

We have resisted your word in our hearts: Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

Pause for prayers of our heart and mind

May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and keep us in life eternal.

Amen.

Readings:

John 3: 1 – 17

There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. 2 After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. “Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.” 3 Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” 4 “What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” 5 Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. 6 Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. 7 So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.” 9 “How are these things possible?” Nicodemus asked. 10 Jesus replied, “You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don’t understand these things? 11 I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won’t believe our testimony. 12 But if you don’t believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven. 14 And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. 16 “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. 17 God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

Sermon

As I travelled to the gym this week, I saw a little of Nicodemus in myself. This week I decided to go a little later than I normally, and the gym was quieter than it normally is when I go. Normally I use the bike, away from the mirrors in the corner of the room – which frankly suits me down to the ground. But on this occasion, only a bike next to the Gym Strutters, right in front of the mirror was available! In that moment of having to be front and centre in the gym (that’s how it felt, even if no one else was taking the slightest bit of notice of me in reality), I understood a little of how Nicodemus, lurking in the safety of shadows, suddenly felt when he was front and centre, speaking to Jesus, and asking him some questions.

So the Pharisee Nicodemus. As I mentioned he arrives in the night. **Why come at night?** Maybe he is worried about asking his questions for fear of the answer? Or perhaps, it’s about his fear of the response from others. I often wonder what Nicodemus’ was thinking about as he approached Jesus? I guess he’d come for a chat with Jesus, but ended up with more questions than answers!

Born from above? born again? Why be born again? And how does one get born again? And what’s this business about being born of the Spirit? Nicodemus stayed. He stayed, he listened and he learnt from Jesus. Maybe the 2nd row didn’t allow Nicodemus to get the answers he wanted, and pushing himself to the front row was the only way to get them answered, and so coming at night allowed him to have a 121 audience with the teacher, Jesus.

Nicodemus is standing before the full length mirror Jesus is holding up and for once he is looking at Jesus and at himself with all of his struggles and all of his hopes and all of his fears right out there in the open. Here Jesus tries several different ways of explaining this concept of “re-birth” to Nicodemus, but he simply cannot get past his very literal understanding of what Jesus is trying to get across to him.

I think the author of John’s Gospel seems to recognize something in Nicodemus. I hope it strikes a chord with us all, at different moments in our Journey’s of Faith that some people like the Women at the Well come to faith quickly, and others like Nicodemus – well ... take their time! There is something in this “come and see” dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus that gives me the freedom to ask the stupid question, to take my thoughts and feelings about faith to God in prayer, to Bible Study, to Worship – so that I, **we**, can wrestle the truth before us.

God's love for us is so great, that he gave Christ, his son, that all who believe might have eternal life. As long as our journey ends with the realization that the life, death and resurrection of Christ, IS FOR US. It doesn't matter what pathway we take to get to that TruthGod Love's us unconditionally.

We are called in this age, and in this context to bear witness to God's transforming Love. Because it is this testimony and outpouring that encourages others to seek the transforming grace of God on their lives. God just goes ahead and loves the world, without asking permission. God Loves us, and in the face of that kind of love, we can either yield whole-heartedly to God's Love, or frankly, we can run away screaming, because in the face of 'god so loved the world he gave his only son...' LOVE, you cannot remain neutral.

God loves a Samaritan woman. God loves a man paralyzed his entire life. God loves a man blind from birth. God loves Jesus' friend dead in the tomb for four days. God loves Peter who will deny his discipleship. Just like Nicodemus, we are looking for correct and proper answers, appropriate and sensible answers to life's many and varied questions.

More simply we want things to be logical, sensible and grounded. That is what the world wants God's love to be – But God SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS SON – love, is not logical, sensible or grounded – its mind blowing, illogical and its transformative. God intends Good for us – in our human life's here and now, and in the life, eternal, to come.

This is a rallying call to make it known that God desires to be in relationship with all people – a gospel that we Methodist's must proclaim – because all can be saved and all can be saved to the uttermost. This passage today tells us a different story, and story of Salvation, redemption, and reconciliation with God, which needs to be shared with our apathetic world. No matter what, God Says – I Love You.

Tom's six year-old son Benjamin protested his bedtime. Frustrated by his father's refusal to budge, Benjamin finally became so frustrated that he said, "Daddy, I hate you!" Tom, possessing the presence of mind I wish I more frequently displayed, replied, "I'm sorry you feel that way, Ben, but I love you." To which Benjamin replied, "Don't say that!" Surprised, Tom continued, "Ben, but it's true -- I love you." "Don't say that, Daddy." "But I love you, Ben." "Stop saying that, Daddy! Stop saying it right now!" And then it came: "Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you...like it or not!" Even at six years old, you see, Benjamin realized that in the face of unconditional love he was powerless.

Once Tom refused to negotiate, refused to make his love for his son conditional on something Benjamin did, then Ben couldn't do anything but accept or flee that love. The same is true with us. If God makes God's great love for the world and us conditional, then we, suddenly, have tremendous power. We can negotiate. We can threaten to reject God's love. We can even tell God to take a hike if we don't care for God's terms. But when God just loves us -- completely and unconditionally -- and when God just goes and dies for us, well then the jig is up, there's just nothing we can do to influence God, but wholeheartedly accept his love. Grace and Peace to you all, from our Lord, Jesus Christ, who loves you – even to death on the cross and beyond. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession (followed by Lord's prayer and the Peace)

Let us pray for the Church of God throughout the world, for . . . Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Let us pray for those who have power and influence and for all who govern the nations, for . . . Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Let us pray for the powerless, for all victims of famine and war, and for all who strive for justice and peace, for . . . Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Let us pray for the afflicted and sorrowful and for all who need our prayers, for . . . Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously**

hear us.

Let us remember before God those who have passed from this life in faith and obedience, giving thanks for . . . Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

Eternal God, through the self-offering of your Son you have filled our lives with your presence. Help us in our sufferings and trials and strengthen us in our weakness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer: -

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

**Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come, Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive our sins As we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial And deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and forever. AMEN.**

Offering

Lord of all, As we make our offering today. We do not just bring you our money. We bring ourselves. We bring our fellowship, We bring your church everywhere, Praying that you will use all we do, All we say, And all we are, For the growth of your kingdom, And the fulfilment of your will, Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Blessing

Go now and proclaim the Gospel, Not just through words but deeds, Through what you say, What you do, And Who you are. May others, as they meet with you, Meet with Christ, And know his living presence for themselves. The Blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, And Holy Spirit. Be with you, with those you love, and those you are called to love, Now in the name of Christ. **Amen.**