

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking: 'Heaven sent—from God, of God! All that is good, worthy and honourable; all that represents the character and the goodness of God. Let it be that our wisdom, our nature, our words and actions reflect such a Heavenly Spirit. Let this praise and time of worship be received as heaven-sent: God's gift to us of time, space, and opportunity. Let us come before God and raise our worship.'

Hymn CH4 166 – Lord of all hopefulness,

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

Gracious God, we gather here in this place, we come to draw near to you as you draw near to us. We come humbly and honestly and offer this time to you.

All creation reveals you, from the stardust to the sawdust, from Munros to tiny toes. Through Jesus you have revealed so much of your nature, your kindness, your gentleness, your generosity, your integrity.

You long for us to become more like Jesus, to live peaceful lives building healthy relationships with all people, creating community and good stewardship of our world.

Lord we confess that we do not always live up to your high standards, that too often we fail, giving in to envy and craving what is not ours.

Forgive us, Lord, we pray, we honestly confess our faults and failings to you and ask you to help us to be the people you made us to be. May we always draw near to you in all things and look to Jesus to guide us.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; 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 us our sins as we forgive others that 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.

Reading: Mark 9: 30 – 37

³⁰Jesus and his disciples left that place and went on through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where he was, ³¹because he was teaching his disciples: “The Son of Man will be handed over to those who will kill him. Three days later, however, he will rise to life.”

³²But they did not understand what this teaching meant, and they were afraid to ask him.

³³They came to Capernaum, and after going indoors Jesus asked his disciples, “What were you arguing about on the road?”

³⁴But they would not answer him, because on the road they had been arguing among themselves about who was the greatest. ³⁵Jesus sat down, called the twelve disciples, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and be the servant of all.” ³⁶Then he took a child and made him stand in front of them. He put his arms round him and said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the one who sent me.”

All Age Talk

Hymn CH4 356 – Meekness and majesty,

Sermon – ‘First or Last?’

I wonder this morning, have you ever aspired to be the greatest? To be number one. The best in your academic field. The best in your profession. The best at homemaking. The best at home baking. The best at sport. Have you, do you, want others to recognise greatness in you? I am sure at some stage in all our lives we have all aspired to be great at something. Maybe, we have even desired to be the “greatest” within the Church. Yet, in today’s reading, we find Jesus saying well-known words to His Disciples: *‘Whoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and be the servant of all.’*

For us humans, “greatness” or being “first”, is surely about status, power, control, money, reputation, position, or fame. How we long to be “the bees’ Knees”! And yet, never see the losing team in a major sporting final celebrating coming second. You never remember the name of the runner up of Strictly Come Dancing. No-one shouts out “I am second best – we are second best – and that’s amazing!”. As Christians, do we strive to be the greatest that I have just described? If we do, if we are seeking about status, power, control, money, reputation, position, or fame, have we not gone astray somewhere? Do we not need to reconsider why we are following Jesus and what our purpose is?

Why were the Disciples following Jesus? What was their *purpose*? As we look at our text today, we find that Jesus is sharing with the Disciples, as they are passing through Galilee, that He will be betrayed, killed, and then rise again. We read that the Disciples don’t understand what Jesus is talking about, but wisely, this time, Peter *does not* rebuke Jesus for his words. *Unwisely*, however, when they arrive in Capernaum, Jesus asks them what they were arguing about along the way. Rather than trying to figure out what Jesus means about this betrayal, killing, and rising, they’ve been arguing about which one of them was the greatest.

In response, Jesus sits down with the twelve and says to them, *“Whoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and be the servant of all.”* And then, to reinforce His point, Jesus takes a little child and places the child amid the group. He says, *“Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me;*

and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the one who sent me.”

At first it strikes me as odd that the Disciples are (actually) arguing about which one of them is the best – how could they get caught up in something so silly – they, who were following Jesus, surely knew that Jesus cared little for matters such as status and power and titles and places of honour. Yet on the other hand, if I can let myself really imagine the scene, I can see how it might unfold: These Disciples are a group of twelve people, probably never chosen for anything before, and now, just twelve out of so many, they are called, by name, to follow Jesus.

On top of this Jesus has become something of a celebrity, this man who teaches with authority, debates with the Pharisees, feeds people, and heals the sick wherever he goes. To be a Disciple is like being in a small inner circle. I can see how over the course of three years with him, the Disciples might start arguing, pointing out who was called first, or who Jesus confided in most, or who Jesus sent out most frequently, or who Jesus corrected most often. Which Disciple was the best? The greatest? I can see how it would happen, as it happens to us in so many situations today. We get caught up in our own importance and want to know where we stand in relation to everyone else.

Jesus clears this up quickly: if we are to be his followers, where we stand in relation to everyone else is last, at the end of the line, serving others. That is some concise and clear perspective. To illustrate His point, Jesus brings a child to the centre of the inner circle and talks about welcoming them. The child is at the centre, and the Disciples are moved to the edges of the circle. A child, a rare topic of conversation in the Bible and I think most people like these little passages, because children today are so treasured. We value children, love children, dote on children. So, when we read a text like today's, we get these heart-warming pictures in our heads. Indeed, images, paintings, sketches of this text, and others which mention children usually depict a happy friendly Jesus bouncing some cute and rosy-cheeked baby on his lap. Sweet, touching pictures of Jesus with children that make us smile.

However, such images don't tell the whole story, let us know how significant these mentions of children in the Bible are, or help us to understand what an important point Jesus is trying to make here. Every time we hear the size of a crowd quoted in the Gospels, the number given would be the number of the men only in the crowd. As Scripture sometimes explicitly notes, women and children were not counted in these numbers, because they weren't considered important enough, or significant enough to count. What mattered in Jesus' day was how many adult males were present. Women were considered less important, and children were even less so. Children were certainly loved, and they were important in terms of being able to carry on a family line. But children, in Jesus' day, were not what they are today.

Why was this? Were people just less loving in Jesus' day? No – they loved their families like we do, but children were vulnerable. Perhaps as many as half of all children simply wouldn't survive until adulthood. Furthermore, children didn't have any social or legal standing or status in society. They had no power. They were simply not-yet-adults who were being trained to be adults, and they would count for something when they became adults. So, when Jesus talks about children, he's bringing to the centre of attention a group of people that no one else is particularly interested in. Jesus is talking about people who weren't even really considered worth counting, thinking about. He's making them the focus of his example, the object of his teaching, the important centre of attention.

The Disciples, for all Jesus had taught them, were still interested in power and status but, Jesus says, the way to be first where it matters is to welcome those that are not just lower in status – but to *serve* those who had no status at all, who weren't even high enough to be counted or given a status. Jesus wants us to take those who don't even count and put them at the centre. In doing so, we take ourselves *out* of the centre, to the edges, placed as servants. In doing so, we welcome Jesus, and welcome God. And the one who welcomes God to their table – surely this person would feel themselves to be the greatest in a way that, actually, matters.

The only question left for us then is this: who is it who is like the unseen, uncounted child for us today? Who are we not counting? Not seeing? Not

including? We can ask ourselves that question in many settings. Who don't we see right within the walls of this church? Whose opinion do we count as less than our own? Sometimes, we look at someone who has been here for less time than someone else, and we don't really see them. Sometimes, we look at someone who has been here their entire life, and we don't really count them. Sometimes, we overlook someone because they are too young to for us to take seriously and sometimes, we count someone out because they are too old. I don't believe we do things so intentionally or overtly – but whenever we become very focused on making sure things are how we want them, we're probably putting ourselves at the centre of the circle, and not leaving room for someone else. I wonder today, who don't you see in your community?

This week I encourage you to think about who we don't count in society – who don't we even notice? Maybe it's a waiter bring your food to the table, the big issue seller outside the supermarket. Maybe it's the person collecting who empties your bins, or the checkout operator. Maybe it's the refugee we overlook, or the teenager dressed in something we would never have dared to wear, or the person trying to discreetly obtain food from a foodbank.

Jesus wants us to welcome them, *welcome them*, by putting them at the centre of our attention. As we come to the Table today, who have we left behind? Who should we be bringing to the table without us? The only way we can do that, is if we get out of the middle of the circle, and take a spot on the edge, so that there's room, a place, for the ones who don't get counted. And then, we serve.

³⁵Jesus sat down, called the twelve disciples, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and be the servant of all." ³⁶Then he took a child and made him stand in front of them. He put his arms round him and said to them, ³⁷"Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the one who sent me.""

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Merciful God, you know our hearts, you know that deep down we long to draw near to you and offer all that we are and all that we have to you. Receive our gifts today, take and use them as you will, not as we desire. Build your kingdom, here and now.

Honestly and humbly, we enter your presence thankful for your unending love for creation. We come aware of our imperfections and our need for transformation.

We long for your kingdom to come here and now and know that we have a part to play in making it happen. Our beautiful world has been scorched and ripped open to feed our greed instead of our needs.

Nations race to control access to raw materials and resources, paying no heed to local people or environments that are fragile and damaged beyond repair by their actions.

Our obsession with consumerism blinds us to our mistakes, ravaging the fragile planet and fuelling profits margins while ignoring slave labour. Our desire to escape reality through film and social media has dulled our senses to the poverty, injustice, abuse, and neglect alive and well in our own reality.

Our need to be right, on every subject to be in the right group, to be right about our beliefs, our values, our morals stop us being open to others who are in different groups or hold different beliefs, values and morals.

Lord, save us from ourselves, help us to see you in all people and to be open to resolving disagreements or conflicts with those people we call 'them' but who are really just a part of the greater us, for we are all one in you.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers and lead us into your kingdom, here and now. Amen.

The Invitation

The living God journeys with us through all the twists and turns of life offering us food for the journey. Here at this table, we are invited to choose life. So, come and be nourished. Come and rediscover love. Come and find the path God wants you to take. The God of life meets us here.

Hymn CH4 19 – Ye gates, lift up your heads on high;

The Sacrament of Holy Communion

Jesus journeyed with his disciples leading them on paths they would never have imagined. He taught them as they travelled about love and relationships and hospitality. And he set up a memorial meal with them taking bread and breaking it, taking wine and sharing it, symbols of how far he would go to offer life in all its fullness.

And so we take bread and wine today and as we share them we remember that the way Christ offered life to us was by giving his life for the world.

Let us pray,

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Gracious God, Eternal Father you know how fickle your people are. You know that we quickly forget all that you have done for us. How easily we grumble and become discouraged. Yet still you gave your Son to show us that your promise is true, that you love the world and all that you created.

So, even when we forget you, you wait patiently so that we can easily find you again. When we turn away you lovingly turn us back to the light of your love. As we journey through life you dog our steps, sometimes gently nudging, sometimes prodding, and sometimes dragging us forward. You know the best ways, the ways that lead to life. And, when our spirits flag, you carry us through until we find our feet again.

As we journey to your table today, may we meet you here holding out food for our pilgrimage food that sustains and strengthens and brings us life.

Gracious God, Eternal Father, we remember all who have journeyed with us. Those who have trodden a path for us. Those who have shown us how to travel. And we pray that we may take our place in that line of pilgrims leading others on a journey to fulfilment in you. May we light another's path, by sharing the light we receive from you.

Help us too, to scoop up those we find by the wayside. The lost and the lonely, the weary and downtrodden, the proud and the anguished who see no way back and no way forward.

May we offer a helping hand, a cup of water, a feast of love, so that all may find the strength to choose life and follow the way that you map out. The way that leads to the kingdom of peace and promise and justice for all your people.

As we feast on your body and blood this day may we know ourselves strengthened with the food of love - with more than enough to share for the sake of your kingdom. Amen.

Breaking & Sharing Bread & Wine

We now do this in obedience to Christ's example and appointment.

Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, he blessed it, he broke it and he shared it. We do this to remember him. We eat our bread together.

After supper, Jesus took the cup, the symbol of a new start with God. Sharing it, he said: "Do this to remember me." We drink from our cup together.

The Peace

The peace of the Father of joy; the peace of the Christ of hope; the peace of the Spirit of grace, may the Lord's peace be with you all. Amen.

Prayer of Thanksgiving after Communion

God as you ask us to love you, to walk in your ways and to keep your commands, we thank you that you nourish and sustain us and keep on showing us a new way for a new day.

And so may this feast of your love this day lead us on, revealing the way that you want us to travel equipping and assuring us that you walk right beside us.

So, may we be fueled to take risks, to try new things, knowing your safety net of love waits to catch us and sets us straight once more to join you on the journey. God of life, we choose you. Amen

Hymn CH4 594 – Come, Holy Spirit Come!

Benediction

So, may the Blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Spirit rest upon you and all whom you love this day and always. Amen.