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**Sunday 8th October 2023**

**Prisons Sunday**

**The Rev’d Dr Phil Wall**

**Introduction**

We begin this service of worship, then, by joining in with a Call to Worship that we pray in Oakhill Secure Training Centre every Sunday – words which remind us that wherever we worship – ornate Cathedral or tin shack; hospital ward or leisure centre; mountain top or prison chapel – we do so as one body, one Church family…so will you please join in with the words in bold…

**Call to Worship**

Today is Sunday, a day when Christians across the globe gather together.

**We gather as communities of faith in God’s created world.**

We gather to celebrate that no darkness can extinguish light,

**to remember that love will always be more powerful than death**

and to trust that God will never abandon us. Hope never dies.

**We gather, people of faith in the light of God’s love.**

**Prayers of Approach, Confession & Forgiveness**

Loving God,

on this first day you began creation,

bringing light and life out of chaos.

On this first day

you began your new creation,

raising Jesus Christ as the first fruit of all creation.

On this first day

we once again join all your works in praising you

for the glory of your creation,

the limitlessness of your grace,

the depth of your love.

So we thank you

for the glimpses of goodness that we’ve seen this week –

the food and drink which have sustained our bodies;

the friends, family and strangers who have blessed our daily living;

the words of hope that have graced our hearing.

We thank you, too, for this beautiful, fragile world in which we live

and for the possibility of responding to you through it in wonder and service.

In this world of technicolour transcendence,

forgive us when we bleach it into right and wrong;

sacred and profane;

us and them.

Forgive us when we walk away from neighbours in need

or too easily judge others by the worst of what they’ve done,

losing sight of your image in them.

Forgive us when we forget your love for creation,

for all people,

for ourselves.

Forgive us, we pray…

Magnificent God,

we soak ourselves in your grace.

Rid us of any shame, guilt, or fear that clings to us.

Help us to believe that, as children of your love,

we are free to begin again - to love and be loved –

through Jesus Christ our brother and Saviour. Amen.

**All Age Reflection – Kim’s Game**

* Arrange for a selection of objects (10 – 15) to be seen by the congregation (whether on the screen, at the front or elsewhere).
* Tell the congregation that they need to memorize what is there before one object is taken away and another object added.
* Take away an object and see if the congregation can see what is missing
* Repeat as appropriate.

For some of us it might have been easy to see what was missing. For others of us, it will have been harder. The same might be said of those who are missing from our communities. Who are the people we see? Who are the ones who remain unseen – perhaps ignored or even unwanted? All too often, those who have spent time in custody are overlooked in our society - even in our churches - yet Jesus was keen to gather the lost, the last, and the least and invite them to God’s party. We all make mistakes. So how can we be communities who practice forgiveness, dance with grace, look out for and welcome ex-offenders and all who are on the margins today?

**Prayer for Illumination**

God who listens and speaks today,

give us open ears, hearts, and minds,

that we may hear your words of wonder, challenge, and comfort. Amen.

**Reading**

Psalm 40:1-17

**Sermon Notes**

* A Song of David, Psalm 40 is a ‘psalm of two halves’ – the first 11 verses focusing on praise for God’s protection and saving acts; the second six expressing a feeling of being overwhelmed by one’s mistakes and enemies.
* Preachers could base their reflection on the fact that that churches often don’t sit easy with holding thanksgiving together with lament; praise with pain; faith with doubt…as evidenced in the fact that the Sunday lectionary only includes the first 11 verses of this Psalm! Yet, just as David offers both in one song, can we bring our whole selves to God, saying – ‘Here I am’ – in our beauty and brokenness.
* Others might want to focus on the challenge of being different within a church community – how to we make space for people to be their authentic selves in worship and service? This could be linked to the fact that it is prisons week and a reflection on how we can be places of welcome and support to ex-offenders. There is more material about prisons week at [Prisons Week](https://www.prisonsweek.org/)
* Verse 1 tells us that God heard the cries of the Psalmist – a reminder that God is the God who hears – one to whom we can speak with freely – in good times as in bad. The opening lines ‘I waited patiently for the Lord’ can perhaps better be translated as ‘I waited and waited for the Lord’ – a reminder that things will happen in God’s time, which does not always suit our quick fix society.
* Verses 6-8 remind the reader that true worship is to live God’s way, not to engage in empty ritual that has little impact on our life or world.
* Verses 12-16 expose the depth of David’s pain and worries and his ability to share these with God. What pains and worries do we keep hidden? What would it be like if we could freely share these with each other and with God?

**Prayers of the People**

Let’s spend a few moments looking back over the past week. Think about all that was good - those places where God’s grace was strewn across our path; for all that we want to give thanks for, in our lives and the life of our world…

(a time of silence)

For the beauty of misty mornings, shiny conkers, and the hush of evening light…

For the comfort of *Strictly* and *Bake Off*, the wonder of a new day, the chance for a fresh start…For the kindness of strangers, the familiarity of friends, the love of family…

Gracious God, in all that is good and beautiful and life giving we encounter you and we give you thanks.

Now let’s look again at the past week, because woven in amongst the good stuff will have been events and experiences- in our lives, the lives of others, or in the life of our world - that have been difficult and challenging or sad and frightening…and in God’s presence let’s remember them…

(a time of stillness)

For those who suffer in mind, body, or spirit…(pause)

For the dying and bereaved…(pause)

For those imprisoned by bars, addiction, or poverty…(pause)

For those striving for the transformation of the world…(pause)

For the people and places on our hearts and minds today…(pause)

Living God, we pray for justice and healing; for grace and transformation; for compassion and understanding. As we think of those who reside in prisons; who have been victims of crime; or who work within the criminal justice system, we pray the prison week prayer remembering that –

Lord, you offer freedom to all people. We pray for those in prison. Break the bonds of fear and isolation that exist. Support with your love prisoners and their families and friends, prison staff and all who care. Heal those who have been wounded by the actions of others, especially the victims of crime. Help us to forgive one another, to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly together with Christ in his strength and in his Spirit, now and every day.

All this and more we ask in the name of Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father…

**Blessing**

May the Christ who walks on wounded feet walk with us on the road.
May the Christ who serves with wounded hands stretch out our hands to serve.
May the Christ who spoke forgiveness from a cross open our hearts to forgive.
May we see the face of Christ in everyone we meet.

May everyone we meet see the face of Christ in us.

And may the blessing of God – Creator, Christ, and Comforter – rest on us

and spill out on those we meet this week,

so that all may know of God’s extravagant, eternal love. Amen.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | *RS* | *CH4* | *StF* | *MP* |
| God’s spirit is in my heart (go tell everyone) | 576 |  | 404 |  |
| Beauty for Brokenness |  | 259 | 693 | 806 |
| For the Healing of the Nations | 620 | 706 | 696 |  |
| Do not be afraid | 591 | 191 |  | 115 |
| Called by Christ to be disciples |  |  | 660 |  |
| God! When human bonds are broken | 652 |  | 649 |  |
| I will speak out for those who have no voices |  |  | 702 |  |
| The Lord’s my Shepherd (Crimmond) |  | 14 | 480 | 660 |
| The Lord’s My Shepherd (Townend) |  |  | 481 | 1008 |

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP- *Mission Praise*

You may wish to listen to [U2’s track 40](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Ln7R_wnfQM) as an introit or concluding piece of music.