

# ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE

11<sup>th</sup> July 2021

## INTRODUCTION



This week's readings ought perhaps to come with some kind of hazard warning, since they make it clear that walking God's way is not for the faint hearted. Anyone who thinks that the life of Christian discipleship somehow protects us from any harm or adversity would do well to reconsider. If anything – walking God's way sometimes feels even harder than for those who don't. You only have to look at some of the psalms to realise this; the psalmist cries out "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (*Psalms 10*)

Many times in the bible and in reality for us; those who speak out for God or for those without a voice find themselves rejected, ridiculed, imprisoned - or worse still, put to death. The prophet Amos was told to clear off and go back to his farming because people didn't want to hear his message from God. When St. Paul writes to the various churches he makes no bones of the fact that he is persecuted for his faith. And because God's way might seem so counter-cultural to the lives that many lead today – it can be difficult to speak out or speak up.

As Christians we sometimes need a bit of courage to speak up for God in a world that seems indifferent or resistant. So as you come to worship this morning, give thanks for the people that you have heard speak up for God. And if you're not feeling terribly courageous – offer that to God too.

## CALL TO WORSHIP

The light and peace of Jesus Christ be with you.  
**And also with you.**

The glory of the Lord has risen upon us.  
**Let us rejoice and sing God's praise for ever.**

The Lord is here.  
**His spirit is with us.**

## **TURNING TO GOD**

We come to God as one from whom no secrets are hidden to ask for his forgiveness and peace.

God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make your face to shine upon us.  
Lord, have mercy,  
**Lord, have mercy.**

May your ways be known on the earth,  
your saving power among the nations.  
Christ, have mercy,  
**Christ, have mercy.**

You, Lord, have made known your salvation,  
and reveal your justice in the sight of the nations.  
Lord, have mercy.  
**Lord, have mercy.**

May the God of love  
bring us back to himself,  
forgive us our sins,  
and assure us of his eternal love  
in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

## **A SONG TO THE KING OF GLORY ON ENTRY TO THE TEMPLE**

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
**for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.**

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?  
**Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.**

They will receive blessing from the LORD,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.

**Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.<sup>[a]</sup>**

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

**Who is the King of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in battle.**

Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.

**Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD of hosts,  
he is the King of glory.**

*(Psalm 24)*

### **Pause for Reflection (1)**

All my hope on God is founded,  
all my trust he shall renew;  
he, my guide through changing order,  
only good and only true:  
God unknown, he alone  
calls my heart to be his own.

Pride of man and earthly glory,  
sword and crown betray his trust;  
all that human toil can fashion,  
tower and temple, fall to dust.  
But God's power, hour by hour,  
is my temple and my tower.

Still from Earth to God eternal  
sacrifice of praise be done;  
high above all praises praising  
for the gift of Christ his Son:  
hear Christ's call, one and all –  
we who follow shall not fall.

## **NEW TESTAMENT READING**

### **Ephesians 1:3-14 (New Living Translation)**

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.



God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—which is to fulfil his own good plan. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because we are united

with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan.

God's purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in Christ would bring praise and glory to God. And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.

Thanks be to God

## **GOSPEL READING**

### **Mark 6:14-29 (New Revised Standard Version)**

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."

She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."



The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

### **REFLECTION (by Richard Wood)**

The infamous story of Salome's Dance and the Beheading of John the Baptist is perhaps one of the juiciest pieces of gossip in the Bible - a story of infidelity, family intrigue, royal gossip, glamorous parties, dignitaries, sex, oaths, politics, hatred, power plays and a terrible end for John.

This is the kind of big story that sells newspapers! Even Jesus, when he hears this piece of earth-shattering news, is rocked by it. But this is not the big story for Mark.

Amongst the intrigue, the sex, the power plays of the rich and the powerful, we find at the edges the story of a preacher. This preacher didn't seem to know what was good for him when he crossed Herod and his wife Herodias, berating them for their sinful relationship.

Who do you most associate with in this story? I asked myself this question and started with John before realising that I am not really in the mould of an Old Testament Prophet, I've never worn a camel hair shirt, I have never been in quite such a position of jeopardy as John was here, and, as I'm preaching this message to you today, certainly not to the point of death! I don't think any of us would immediately pick Herod. Yet, Herod's story, as I considered it, began to sound uncomfortably familiar.

Herod, we are told, was "greatly perplexed" at hearing John, but liked to listen to his preaching nonetheless. Herod knew the voice of God in John, found it compelling and yet could not quite bring himself to follow this voice. Instead, he kept the preacher captive.

We may hear our own inner preacher from time to time and will, we all hope, immediately and unquestioningly follow that voice - the voice of God - in our lives. Yet there are occasions when our reaction might sound more like Herod's - we hear the voice but cannot bring ourselves to ditch our earthly treasures in order to follow. Instead we live in denial, shut the voice away, bury it in some deep dungeon whilst we wrestle with our soul.

I don't want to sound overdramatic here, but sometimes it is only by grace that we ever heard this voice at all. Maybe we are all closer to Herod than we think, and perhaps our earthly desires, the treasures we claim as our own, have the power to silence our inner preacher if we allow them to dance in our lives.

Some years ago, I moved my family over to the USA to a job promising sack-loads of money. I moved from a job that was tough to do, not least financially, but which was really rewarding and I had very clearly been directed to by my inner preacher some years before. And, if I'm honest, my inner preacher did not like this new move at all. In fact I'd go as far as to say that God warned me not to take this job. I systematically ignored these warnings. The consequences were perhaps predictable. 'Long-story-short', It was an unmitigated disaster that cost years of life.

I often consider this disaster to have been the Grace of God though – after all God could simply have left me to go to build my own little kingdom, and the end of that story would be a good deal sorrier.

The proverbs tell us that "Just as the grave is never full, so human eyes are never satisfied," (Prov 27:20). Death and destruction come to everything in an earthly kingdom. Herod did indeed build his own kingdom - completed the life-time project of his father, the Temple in Jerusalem, only to be himself exiled to Gaul and for the magnificent Temple of Herod to be destroyed some years later by the Romans with, as Jesus predicted, "not one stone left standing on another". It remains true that the kingdoms we build with our own hands, in which we shut away the preacher, are destined to die. The danger is that in not letting go of our treasures, we preside over a dying kingdom destined for destruction.

As I reflect on this uncomfortable truth, I wonder who is the real captive in this story? John or Herod? Herod, for all his self-indulgence, lusts, power plays and attempts to gratify his own wishes, was unable to satisfy himself, even as ruler of an earthly kingdom and found himself captive to it, compelled to do things he did not want to do. Most sadly of all, Herod did not recognise Jesus when he finally came to meet him on Good Friday – he could not hear the voice of the preacher. The preacher was already dead in his own heart, beheaded with John the Baptist.

The theologian Walter Brueggemann writes in his book *Preaching: The Word Militant* that preaching is risky, specifically that it is foolish, dangerous and

exposing for the preacher. No Biblical example, save perhaps Jesus himself, demonstrates this better than John's death. He never shied away from his calling despite the obvious danger.

Preaching the Kingdom of God is not for the faint-hearted but that is exactly what we are called to if we are followers of Jesus. We don't need to be and Old Testament style prophets. In fact, we may not be great preachers of the word, but we do preach with our lives every day, and if our lives do not match up, our words mean little anyway. St Francis famously said: "Preach the Gospel at all times and where possible use words".

It is by the grace of God that we hear the words of the inner preacher. It is our choice whether we live out those words. If we follow the commission of Jesus to "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation" (Mk 16:15), then we must also learn to let go of our treasures, something Herod could never quite do, and be prepared for the risks involved, inspired by John the Baptist.

### **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

In response to what we have heard, we affirm our trust and faith in God:

**We believe in God the Father,  
from whom every family  
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,  
who lives in our hearts through faith,  
and fills us with his love.**

**We believe in God the Holy Spirit,  
who strengthens us  
with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God;  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.**

## **PRAYERS**

We offer ourselves with all who have lived holy and dedicated lives;  
Lord, make us to be numbered with your saints.

We give thanks for the life and witness of John the Baptist.

We pray for all who have been imprisoned for their faith,  
for all who at this time are facing persecution or danger,  
for all who stand firmly for freedom and justice.

*Silence*

Show us your mercy Lord,

**And grant us your salvation.**

O Lord, support all who seek to support others,  
all who care for the homeless and poverty-stricken'  
all who work with prisoners or outcasts.

Give courage to all who seek to live in simplicity,  
to all who sacrifice themselves that others may live.

We pray for monastic communities, for monks and nuns,  
for all leading lives of quiet dedication.

*Silence*

Show us your mercy Lord,

**And grant us your salvation.**

We pray for all who speak out for the communities to which we belong,  
for councillors and community workers.

Bless our homes, our families and friends,  
support with your love all who sustain family life.

We pray for families that are in trouble at this time.

*Silence*

Show us your mercy Lord,

**And grant us your salvation.**

O Lord, lover of the poor, be a strength to the persecuted.

We pray for those who lack the resources they need,  
for communities with poor medical supplies,

all who lack food and shelter, any who are denied a proper education.

We remember all who are in sickness or any kind of need, praying especially for Bryan Plester, Brenda Hulland, Paul Burston, David New, Anna Clements, and Adrina and Alan Price

And in a moment of silence we hold before you those known only to us and to you, who are in need of prayer.

*Silence*

Show us your mercy Lord,

**And grant us your salvation.**

Glory to you, O Lord, for you give us the victory,  
in you we triumph over death and have life eternal.

We pray for the saints who stood firm and witnessed to your love;  
we pray for all our loved ones departed  
and all who mourn their loss.

We remember the recently departed, Geoff Hulland.

And we remember with love and gratitude those whom we love but see no longer, especially: Betty Wake, Evelyn King, Edwin Hulme, Freda Keightley, Reg Pritchard, Stanley & Elvina Kennett, Mary Pritchard, Alan Dugdale, and Gordon Neal.

*Silence*

Show us your mercy Lord,

**And grant us your salvation.**

Merciful Father,

**accept these prayers  
for the sake of your Son,  
our Saviour Jesus Christ.  
Amen.**

We pray the Lord's Prayer together as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.**

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done;  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin  
against us.  
Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.**

**And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass  
against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power and the glory, for ever  
and ever.  
Amen.**

### **Pause for Reflection – (2)**

Lord, you sometimes speak in wonders  
unmistakable and clear;  
mighty signs to prove your presence,  
overcoming doubt and fear

Lord, you sometimes speak in whispers,  
still and small and scarcely heard;  
only those who want to listen  
catch the all-important word.

Lord, you sometimes speak in silence,  
through our loud and noisy day:  
we can know and trust you better  
when we quietly wait and pray.

Lord, you love to speak in Scripture:  
words that summon from the page,  
shown and taught us by your Spirit  
with fresh light for every age.

Lord, you always speak in Jesus,  
always new yet still the same;  
teach us now more of our Saviour;  
make our lives display his Name.

*Christopher Idle*

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## **SENDING**

From where we are  
to where you need us,  
**Jesus, now lead on.**

From the security of what we know  
to the adventure of what you will reveal,  
**Jesus, now lead on.**

To refashion this world  
until it resembles the shape of your kingdom,  
**Jesus, now lead on.**

Because good things have been prepared  
for those who love God,  
**Jesus now lead on.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
and the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,  
be with us all, evermore.  
Amen.**

*<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/appeals/order-service-song-prophets>*

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