

Call to worship

We have been called, and we have come.

We have been summoned, and we are here.

We have found the courage to join you in worship, once more, our Lord and our God.

We have come. Come amongst us, by your Spirit. Amen.

Psalm 133 - The Blessedness of Unity

A Song of Ascents.

¹ How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

² It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.

³ It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.

For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Hymn: Be still for the presence

Be still for the presence of the Lord

the Holy One is here;

come bow before Him now

with reverence and fear:

in Him no sin is found –

we stand on holy ground.

Be still, for the presence of the Lord

The Holy One is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord

is shining all around;

He burns with holy fire,

with splendour He is crowned:

how awesome is the sight –

our radiant King of light!

Be still, for the glory of the Lord

Is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord

is moving in this place:

He comes to cleanse and heal,

to minister His grace –

no work too hard for Him.

In faith receive from Him.

Be still for the power of the Lord

Is moving in this place.

David J Evans

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Opening Prayers

Merciful Father,

Thank you for creating all people equal and calling us your children.

We thank you for the peace that comes when we live together in harmony.

Forgive us for the times when we have caused division and when we have been quick to speak and slow to listen.

Help us to be humble in heart and seekers of reconciliation and peace. Amen.

Risen Lord, Thank you for uniting us with your Spirit and making us one in you.

Thank you for choosing us to be your body in the world to proclaim your good news and act in ways of love.

May you be glorified through us and be made known to the ends of the earth. Amen.

Compassionate Jesus,

Thank you for showing us your heart for all people for demonstrating welcome to the marginalised and hospitality to those who others may deem unworthy.

You do not overlook anyone, but know them by each name. We thank and praise you for the same concern you have shown each of us.

Truly you are our Good Shepherd, the giver of abundant life. Amen.

We now say the Lord's Prayer

Readings: Genesis 45:1-15 - Joseph Reveals Himself to His Brothers

¹ Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. ⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰ You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' ¹² And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Matthew 15:21- 28 The Canaanite Woman's Faith

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Reflections on the readings:

"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!...For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore." –Psalm 133

Our readings this week invite us to see and explore a vision of God's kingdom founded on unity. They paint a picture of what it means to be together as God's people, and in doing so challenges us to see who gets included in God's kingdom, and what this means for our lives as followers of Christ. Perhaps this is even more important in these current times. What does it mean to be together?

Psalm 133, that I read at the very beginning of our service, in short but sweet words, says that in God's kingdom, the blessing of the Lord is found when God's people are together. Here, the writer says that the unity of God's people is as precious as holy oils and as sacred as Mount Zion. It is in this unity, the psalm says, that the 'life to the full' of God's kingdom is offered.

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So, what does living in this unity look like? Our other readings offer us some illustrations, to see what this is like in practice.

In Genesis 45, after a long time apart, Joseph and his brothers find themselves together once again. Remarkably, after his life has been turned upside down by his brothers' unkindness and jealousy, Joseph shows them forgiveness. These are people who have treated him so unjustly. And yet, just as Joseph has found life by the provision and mercy of God, so he extends this to others – even those who had been so against him.

Instead of turning away, Joseph chooses to stand face to face with those he has been distanced from, and recognises that God's mercy can be shown to them just as it has been to him.

In Matthew 15, we are called to hear this message once again from an unlikely voice. Here, we see Jesus finding himself face to face with a Canaanite woman, pleading for him to heal her daughter. It's important to know that as a Jewish teacher, Jesus would have known the way that his people and the Canaanites were distanced from one another. Their history was one of conflict and distrust, rather than unity. Yet this woman finds the courage and faith to declare that in the Kingdom of God, everyone is brought in. She knows and declares that in Jesus' kingdom, there is space for everyone – Jew and Gentile. God's kingdom is a calling for unity, and in unity, transformation.

In these accounts, we see a picture of unity which calls for radical inclusion. Those from whom we might once have been distanced are brought close, an act made possible by God's mercy. These passages paint a vision of God's kingdom where everyone is seen, heard and is offered fullness of life in God's love. For the many who hear this call to inclusion from places of exclusion, this is a call for justice. Justice that seeks equality, where all people are offered the life of God's kingdom. That together, our understanding of who we are might change, so that all can be offered space.

In Matthew 15, we hear this message from someone standing in a place of exclusion. Yet, whilst the Canaanite woman might once have been considered excluded from God's kingdom, in her faith she declared that with the coming of Christ, she is welcomed in. Justice is offered, that all might be given life. The picture these passages paint invites us to consider what radical inclusion would look like for us today.

You might like to reflect on these questions, and maybe share your responses with someone who you trust or a small group:

Who in our community today do we see as outsiders?

Who do we exclude from our vision of God's kingdom?

In seeking unity, where might we find life if we choose to stand face to face with those we have previously excluded, and as we listen to their call for change?

Closing prayers

Loving and gracious God we give you thanks for the gift of our voices.

For those whose voices make beautiful music, and express emotions and thoughts too complex for words.

For the parents and carers whose voices are a source of security, encouragement and guidance.

For the voices that offer us words of comfort and encouragement, that build us up and give us the strength to keep moving forwards.

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For the voices that bring us new ideas and insights that help us better understand the world we live in.

For strong voices that speak up for justice, and fight for a world where no one is forgotten or left behind.

Today we pray for the voiceless in our world, for those who feel their voice is not being heard.

We pray for those who have been robbed of their voice by an oppressive government or an abusive relationship. May they feel the warmth of your love, and be reminded of their worth. May our voices join with theirs to call for justice and peace.

We think of those who use their voices to oppress and intimidate. May they be shown a new way to live and govern, and learn to do so with humility and compassion.

We think of all the ways in which we can use our own voices. We pray for the compassion to offer words of comfort to others, the wisdom to offer guidance and encouragement, and the motivation to raise our voices and stand up for what we believe in.

We are sorry for the times when fear has tightened our throats...

Fear of speaking out of turn and saying the wrong thing. Fear of sticking our heads above the parapet. Fear of speaking out the ideas and thoughts that could change lives.

God, grant us the courage to raise our voices in your name, in the name of love and justice.

May we be your voice in this world, seeking to bring your kingdom closer,

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Hymn Beyond these walls of worship

Beyond these walls of worship,

in the stress and joy of life

Can we offer you our bodies

as a living sacrifice.

Will we keep you at the centre

far beyond the Sunday call

Will we turn to you, be transformed by you

still declare you God of all.

Beyond these walls of worship,

in the times of work and rest

Will we display your love for all

when our faith's put to the test.

When the people that surround us deny
that you are there

Will we display our faith in you

in life, in praise, in prayer

Beyond these walls of worship,

may your Spirit strengthen us

To make the whole of life our worship
as we witness to your love.

From this moment in your presence

send us out now to proclaim

That we'll live our life as a sacrifice

to the glory of your name.

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Blessing

Go in grace, and know that you are called,

Go in love, to find that calling and pursue it,

Go in the Spirit of the Living God, to grow and learn and be transformed,

Seeking justice in our world, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.