

This short act of worship has been produced for you.

If you are well enough and able,
why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time
when you would normally be sharing with others in church
and pray for them as they pray for you.

Call to worship

Creator Spirit, wellspring of our lives,
as the refreshing rain falls on the just and unjust alike,
**refresh us with your mercy,
who knows our own injustice.**

As the stream flows steadily on,
defying all the odds of stone and water,
**flow over every boundary and border
that separates us from each other.**

As the waters of our baptism
washed us and welcomed us,
**renew us now in newness of life
and unity of love.**

As we were once held
in the waters of our mother's womb,
**hold us in the power and peace
of your abiding presence.**

Opening hymn: StF 37 'You're calling us'

Sing / read / pray / proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqBh7Njhap8>

You're calling us and so we are gathered here.
You're building us into a house of prayer.

A holy place where stories of grace are told;
a sacred space where miracles unfold
and praises rise from the offering of our lives.
Let's fill this house, let's fill this house.
*Call the seeker, call the stranger,
call the children, let's hear their praises.
Call the lonely, call the broken,
young and old will sing hosannas.
Let's fill this house, let's fill this house with praise.*

We're living stones built together here
with nail-pierced hands - oh teach us holy fear.
And prayer will rise for all nations;
and open skies will pour your glory down;
and there'll be praise, for the Lord is in this place.
Let's fill this house, let's fill this house.
Call the seeker, call the stranger ...

Graham Kendrick (b 1950)

Prayers of confession and assurance

Loving, generous God,
you brought the world and all that is in it into being.
Delighting in variety and diversity, you fashioned a creation of
beauty and intricate difference.
From the brightest star to the smallest micro-organism,
everything created declares your glory, your imagination,
your attention to detail, and your great love for all that you have
made.
Everything also declares its unity with you, and its connection to
everything else you have made.
For we are one with all creation, as we offer our praise, our
worship, and our love.
We are held together, in a great web of dependence, mutuality
and flourishing.

So, forgive us, Lord, for the ways we deny your image in us, and
the wisdom of your creation.
Forgive us, when we make ourselves the centre of life.
Forgive us, when we withhold from others the fullness of life we
depend on ourselves.
Forgive us, for our selfishness, our wanton destruction, our
callous indifference, our hardness of heart.
Forgive us, when we smooth over injustice as though it does not
exist, or does not matter.
Forgive us, when we rush to resolution without understanding
the cause.

Forgive us, for our refusal to acknowledge reality, and our
refuge in false security.
Forgive us, when we proclaim a peace that has not yet been
won.

We keep a moment of silence.

Generous God, of creation and renewal,
you come to us in Jesus to show a new way to be human.
You teach us how to be real, and fully alive, in him.
You ask us to find our own re-creation, by acknowledging our
oneness with you, and with all that you have made.
In Jesus, you show us that justice is costly,
that peace is not easily gained,
and that your fullness of life is for all, and for everything.
You show us in him that your dream for your creation has no
limits or boundaries.

In his name, forgive us. Renew and restore us. Make us whole.
Open our eyes to the truth, and bend our hearts towards you,
and your love at the heart of all life.
Teach us how to be agents of your peace and those who enable
justice to take root.

Hear Christ's gracious word:

"Your sins are forgiven.

I have come that you may have life, in all its fullness".

Amen. Thanks be to God.

The Readings

Jeremiah 28: 5-9

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord; and the prophet Jeremiah said, 'Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfil the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles. But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.'

Matthew 10: 40-42

'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple - truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'

Reflection

We've become rather used to hearing bad news lately. I doubt whether we've become any better at receiving it. Maybe we're getting numb. Or maybe we fall into despair sometimes. Perhaps we're weary. Or ever more anxious. I doubt very much whether any of us is looking forward to the next instalment of bad news.

Added to that, there's the difficulty of knowing how to receive and interpret the news which is constantly flying our way. From the various predictions and prognostications during the drawn-out Brexit saga, which is far from over yet, to the political news here and around the world, to the apparently endless and vastly contradictory news about the Covid-19 pandemic: we often feel we don't have the knowledge, or the capacity, or the resources, properly and accurately to interpret the news - and especially the bad news - which comes our way.

The prophet Jeremiah, in the Sixth Century BCE, finds himself in a very difficult situation in this regard. He doesn't have any good news to report to the people. They themselves are complacent, greedy, corrupt, unjust, and far from God's mercy or love in their own behaviours. Their enemies, the mighty Babylonian Empire, have started to attack and despoil them. Jerusalem has fallen to them and the future life and mission of Israel looks lost. They are the victims of a ruthless imperial conquest, but they are also, Jeremiah does not want them to forget, hugely culpable. They have not honoured God; they have ignored the plight of the

most vulnerable in their midst; they have perpetrated idolatry, utter self-interest and grave injustice. They are no longer recognisable as the nation summoned by God from among the other nations to give light and hope and grace to the whole world. There's no future hope for them in the might of a restored and rebuilt army: only in looking inwards, only in re-cultivating that innate and instinctive sense of being God's people, a people of mercy, justice, kindness, compassion, fairness and love. Jeremiah, as he put it, feels the truth and the urgency of this message like fire in his bones. And he proclaims it accordingly.

Naturally enough, though, it doesn't go down well. Jeremiah is swiftly despised and persecuted. And it's made worse because he has a rival. Hananiah is a good-news prophet. He contradicts Jeremiah's gloomy, fierce version of events. The people are fine: no need for repentance or sorrow or spiritual renewal or any of that difficult stuff. It's all fine. Everyone should just take a deep breath, chill out, have another gin and tonic (or cup of tea), and relax. There is going to be peace - there already is peace. Everyone just needs to sit back and be a little less intense about it all. Jeremiah is just, to quote a phrase, a doomster. A gloomster. He just loves to share bad news. But, according to Hananiah, there is no bad news. It's all good.

You don't need me to tell you which of them the people want to hear and believe. And all poor Jeremiah can do is to say: "OK then. Let's just see how things turn out, and who's telling the

truth." He will be vindicated, but not in a way that gives anyone pleasure. And the path back to wholeness and renewal for Israel, from exile, ruin and devastation, will be slow, and costly, and painful, and demand all their resources of courage and strength and faith.

People who tell the truth can be hard to be around. They're hard to hear. They're rarely comfortable for us. But I wonder whether in fact one of the most urgent challenges facing us, as God's people in this place and in our time, is that we learn how to hear, and to receive, difficult truth. Not just what we want to hear, but what God needs us to hear, and act on.

Reflecting on this has taken me back to A-Level English Literature. In a way I couldn't have anticipated at the time, I have been haunted in the almost 30 years since by having studied Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It's a play about this very subject. The old king wants to divide his kingdom and sets up an absurd competition between his three daughters. If they shower him with lavish praise and swear to love him more than anything and anyone else, he'll let him have a share of his power and his authority and wealth. His two elder daughters, the conniving, greedy and ambitious Goneril and Regan, do as he wants, despite loathing their father, with over-the-top speeches. His youngest, Cordelia, refuses to play this game of lies, and tells the truth: I love you, she says, but not to excess. I love you, as a daughter should. She is instantly disowned and banished. When the Duke of Kent tries to get between Lear and

his folly, he is also exiled from the realm. Lear's inability to hear the truth and be challenged and changed by it sets in motion a series of devastating, cruel and horrific events which ultimately leave the very nation on the edge of ruin. Lear is accompanied, in his own descent into madness, after his two remaining daughters conspire against him and reject him, by his Fool. The Fool also tells him the uncomfortable truth about himself. And, finally, but too late, Lear is able to hear it. He dies, at least reconciled to Cordelia, but leaving the country on the edge of destruction and facing a difficult path back to security. And all because he refused to hear the truth.

We live now in a time in which there is some urgent and difficult truth to hear and absorb and act on. We will find ourselves resisting it. But perhaps we are being asked to hold ourselves open to what it might mean for us.

In his commissioning of his disciples, Jesus says quite a lot about the kind of message they have to carry. He assures them that it will often be hard for their listeners to take on board. They may even need to move on somewhere else. They, like Jeremiah, will be persecuted. The kingdom of God cannot be established without uprooting some of the ingrained habits and patterns and structural sins of the age, the existing Empire, the worldly patterns of behaviour which Jeremiah saw and named as well: greed; lust for power; the marginalisation of those who make us feel uncomfortable or who challenge our self-sufficiency;

injustice; violence as a means to maintain our position; lack of compassion.

But he ends with these interesting verses. They're verses which perhaps tell us something about how you tell a true prophet from a false one, the person calling you to God's kingdom versus the one just flattering you with fake news, false peace and counterfeit comfort. Jesus ends his great speech with a description of an act of radical kindness: assuaging the thirst of the lowliest, neediest person in the humblest way. You know prophets, as you know all people, by the way their words and their lives have integrity. By the way what they say and what they do are of a piece. You know real prophets as people whose witness, and whose actions, bend towards justice, and kindness, and compassion and love. Jeremiah had tough things to say, because he longed for the people to rediscover their God-given wholeness and fullness of life. Hananiah just flattered them, because he wanted to be popular.

When I talk about lives which 'bend towards justice', of course, I'm quoting Martin Luther King Jr. More than anyone, he teaches me about what it means today to be a prophet like Jeremiah, or a disciple sent by Jesus. Leading the movement to end segregation and racial injustice in the US in the 1960s, he was regularly prosecuted. He went to Birmingham, AL in 1963 to support a campaign there, and was imprisoned. From his cell, on scraps of paper, he wrote a monumental cry of the heart about how to be a true prophet. His *Letter from a Birmingham*

Jail is an impassioned plea to Christians. He urges Christian leaders and prophets to holy impatience, to a deep dissatisfaction with the *status quo* as long as it demeans or injures any of God's children.

Taking on Jeremiah's mantle, King responds to his critics among white Christian moderates: those essentially on his side but against his methods of direct action. They, he says, are more of a problem to the cause of justice than the segregationists themselves, because they are more devoted to order than to justice, and prefer what he calls "a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice". They have failed to realise that all human life is one, because all of God's good creating. They have not grasped, with their insistence on an interminable process that leads nowhere, that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere".

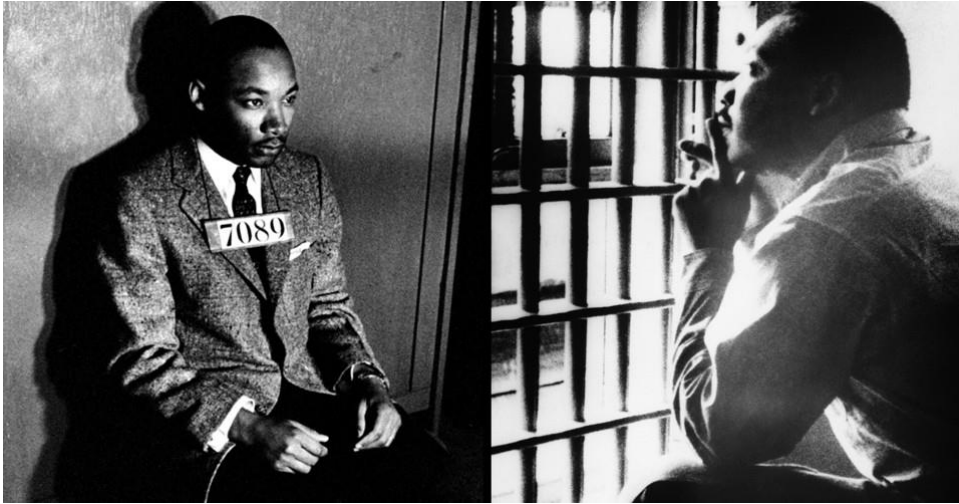
Nowadays, we rightly hold up Martin Luther King Jr as a saint, a true prophet, an authentic disciple of Jesus. In his day, he was reviled. Just five years after Birmingham, he was killed on a motel balcony in Memphis, TN. But he shows us something of what our Bible readings offer today, in modern dress and setting. And, like Jeremiah, like Jesus's commissioning of those first apostles, he shows us what authentic discipleship might look like.

In the coming weeks and months, we have some tough truths to hear and to act on. Some of them we might want to resist.

Truths about which communities the virus, and the recession which is going to follow it, has worst affected, and why. Truths about the ongoing scandal of racism in our world, our country, and even in the Church. Truths about the ways in which those with power ensure that they keep it, often by excluding the powerless. Truths about the lasting damage we're doing and have done to the very fabric of God's creation, such that it - and we with it - are on the edge of catastrophe. Truths about earthly empires, and the Kingdom of God, about human violence and divine mercy.

We long for peace. And God's great promise to us, embodied and fulfilled in Christ, is that there is peace for the taking, a great peace, a *shalom* in which we can all live, in wholeness and justice and joy. But we mustn't settle for false peace, for counterfeit comfort. We must listen to the true prophets, and to Jesus himself, whom Dr King called "a creative extremist for love, truth and goodness". We must be able to hear difficult truth, to be changed by it, and to act upon it - that all God's children might be free. As we ponder how as a Church to emerge from these difficult days, let's allow that clarion call to be always in our ears, and our hearts.

[You can find the complete text of Dr King's 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' [here](#).]



A time of prayer

Lord Jesus, you came to bring health.
You said, “I have come that you might have life in its fullness”.

We trust what you said, and entrust to you
those who we know need healing
and those not known to us,
whose research, skill or prayers bring health.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus, you came to bring peace.
You said, “Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called
the children of God”.

We trust what you said, and entrust to you
those who want and work for peace.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus, you came to bring people value.
You said, “The last shall be first; the least are as good as the
greatest”.

We trust what you said, and entrust to you
those who have no work,
no sense of worth,
who need to know that they are wanted.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus, you came to bring reconciliation.
In you there is neither Jew nor Gentile,
neither black nor white.

We trust you, and entrust to you
those whose lives are battered by prejudice
and those who try to join hands separated by hate.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus, you came to feed the world.
You said, “I am the Bread of Life”.

We trust you, and entrust to you
those who starve
and those who work to move the minds of the overfed
and to empty their wallets.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus, you came to build your church.
You said to us:
“You are the salt of the earth.
You are light for all the world.”

Say these words again, quietly or loudly,
until, with you, we become agents of God’s liberation.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer. Amen.

Sung response to the prayers: StF 525

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ae6ceFv8TM>

Look around you, can you see?
Times are troubled, people grieve.
See the violence, feel the hardness;
all my people, weep with me.
Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison,
Kyrie eleison.

Walk among them, I’ll go with you.
Reach out to them with my hands.
Suffer with me, and together
we will serve them, help them stand.
Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison,
Kyrie eleison.

Forgive us, Father; hear our prayer.
We would walk with you anywhere,
through your suffering, with forgiveness,
take your life into the world.
Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison,
Kyrie eleison.

Jodi Page Clark (b. 1941)

The Lord’s Prayer

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.
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.**

Closing hymn: StF 413 'Send down the fire of your justice'

Sing / read / pray / proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWVq7Y22ti8>

Send down the fire of your justice.

Send down the rains of your love

Come, send down the Spirit,

breath life in your people,

and we shall be people of God.

Call us to be your compassion,

teach us the song your love;

give us hearts that sing,

give us deeds that ring,

make us ring with the song of your love.

Send down the fire ...

Call us to learn of your mercy,

teach us the way of your peace;

give us hearts that feel,

give us hands that heal,

make us walk in the way of your peace.

Send down the fire ...

Call us to answer oppression,

teach us the fire of your truth;

give us righteous souls, '

till your justice rolls,

make us burn with the fire of your truth.

Send down the fire ...

Call us to witness your kingdom,

give us the presence of Christ;

may your holy light

keep us shining bright,

ever shine with the presence of Christ.

Send down the fire ...

Marty Haugen (b. 1950)

Closing prayer and blessing

God, lead us, that we may stand firm in faith for justice.

Teach us love. Teach us compassion.

Above all, out of love and compassion,

teach us to act. Amen.

The opening and closing prayers and the intercessions are @Wild Goose Resource Group, Glasgow G51 3BA, 2001 and 2002