

## Introduction

Welcome to this weeks 10:45 live streamed service from Christchurch Hitchin. As always, we start with some introductions – my name is Andy Searle, and here this morning are our musicians Tom Nichol, Sue Covington and James Bainbridge, reading for us will be Trudy Hankin and John Hamblin is providing the technical support. I want to begin this morning by reading a letter I received in the week – I think all people who are preachers in our Church will have received it. But as one of the things we will think about later, is thankfulness, this letter is very relevant. We know the last 18 months have been hard for all of us here at Church, but we have continued to rely on our preachers, who like me, have had to learn new skills such as speaking to a camera or microphone rather than seeing people in front of them.

Dear Friends

July 4th is 'thank you day' and we wanted to take the opportunity to send special thanks today to 'the company of the preachers' – Local Preachers across the connexion who do so much to enhance the local life of the church. For both of us, it is one of our proudest accolades that we are called to be 'one of Mr Wesley's preachers'. But it's not always an easy role(!). Every service requires preparation in thought and prayer, often juggling for time with the other demands of often busy lives. Then there's the anxieties of the Sunday itself – not just finding the right words but sometimes finding the right church! We all know the feeling of sometimes starting the working week drained from what has given on the Sunday.

So on 'thank you day', we would like to say thank you to you for your commitment to the work; for all the things you labour on alone, for the fellowship in which you support other preachers; for the service you offer in leading our Methodist people in the places in which you are called. The last couple of years have added new layers of challenge to this – thank you for your faithfulness in this too.

With best wishes,

The Revd Sonia Hicks  
President of the Methodist Conference 2021/2022

With best wishes,  
Mrs Barbara Easton  
Vice - President of the Methodist Conference 2021/2022

Opening song STF565. Only by grace can we enter.

Only by grace can we enter  
Only by grace can we stand  
Not by our human endeavor  
But by the blood of the Lamb

Into Your presence You call us  
You call us to come  
Into Your presence You draw us  
And now by Your grace we come  
Now by Your grace we come

Lord if You mark our transgressions  
Who would stand  
Thanks to Your grace we are cleansed  
By the blood of the Lamb

#### Opening Prayer of Thanksgiving

Heavenly Father

Thank you for your amazing power and work in our lives, thank you for your goodness and for your blessings over us. Thank you that you are able to bring hope through even the toughest of times, strengthening us for your purposes. Thank you for your great love and care. Thank you for your mercy and grace. Thank you that you are always with us and will never leave us. Thank you for your incredible sacrifice so that we might have freedom and life. Forgive us for when we don't thank you enough, for who you are, for all that you do, for all that you've given. Help us to set our eyes and our hearts on you afresh. Renew our spirits, fill us with your peace and joy. We love you and we need you, this day and every day. We give you praise and thanks, for You alone are worthy!

In Jesus' Name,  
Amen.

Our reading this morning is taken from Paul's second letter to the Church in Corinth. Bible scholars think that this was written after he made a second visit to the Church, but this visit was quite a painful one for Paul. He is understood to have received criticism from some people for his style of teaching and writing, for there were now false teachers working in the city. So much of this second letter was written in order to defend his style and his work, and to rebuke some of the people who were at work in Corinth.

#### [Reading. 2 Corinthians 12:2-10](#)

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows--was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

#### Message

There was once an Native American boy, who thought he knew more and could do more than anyone else. He was so proud of himself that he walked around like a great chief. The other boys and girls called him Spread Feather, because he strutted about like a big peacock.

One day, Spread Feather was playing ball with the other boys. Not once had he failed to catch the ball. Twice he had thrown the ball with such force that someone had been hurt. Spread Feather grew more and more pleased with himself, as he played.

"No one can play ball as I," he said. "I can catch the swiftest ball that can be thrown. I can throw the ball to the sky. I can run faster than the deer." Spread Feather boasted so loudly that a rabbit heard him. The rabbit came out of the bushes and sat up on his hind legs. He watched Spread Feather play, and listened to his boasting.

Soon a strange boy was standing where the rabbit had sat. The stranger said to Spread Feather, "I would like to play ball with you." "Come on, then!" taunted the boastful boy. "Spread Feather will show the strange ball player how to catch a ball." They began to play. The stranger could run like a deer. He threw the ball so fast that Spread Feather could not see it. He could not catch one. They seemed to come from the sky. At last one ball hit Spread Feather on the mouth. He fell to the ground. His face was red with anger, and his lips were red with blood.

He sprang to his feet and shouted to the stranger, "Though I do not like the taste of your ball, yet I can throw you." "Very well, then," said the stranger. "We will wrestle!" So they began to wrestle. Soon Spread Feather's arms fell at his sides. He panted for air. He had no breath and no strength. The stranger picked Spread Feather up and tossed him over his head like a ball. The boy fell without a word. When Spread Feather opened his eyes, a rabbit sprang into the bushes. He was too weak and too sore to go back to his wigwam. Nor was he eager to meet the other boys. At sunrise a rabbit hopped near. The rabbit slyly suggested that he might like to play another game of ball.

The boy sat up and said to the rabbit, "Spread Feather is no more. He no longer struts like a peacock. He has nothing to say. He will win a new name. It will not be Spread Feather."

That is a story that serves as a warning to anyone who has a tendency to boast to others about their achievements. I am sure many of you know such people – they will always try and direct a conversation to tell you about their latest success or latest possession or holiday they have taken. They will try and make out that whatever you do or say, they have always got something better. So you tell someone about your weeks holiday camping in Clacton, then they tell you about their three weeks cruising round the Maldives in a 5 star yacht!

Paul teaches us about boasting in our reading from 2 Corinthians 12. He speaks of a man who 14 years ago had a very special spiritual experience where he was caught up in the third heaven. By way of background, there was a belief that this the place that God inhabited. The first heaven was the sky, and the second heaven was the stars. So this was a very significant experience. While you can initially think Paul is referring to someone else, it becomes clear later that Paul is actually referring to himself – it was his own personal experience. And he says that while he could boast of this experience to others, he will not, as he wants others to form their opinions of him based on his character and his words. It is worth noting that the context of this teaching was the backdrop of the presence of people in Corinth, who Paul describes as 'super apostles'. These were false teachers who appeared to be superior to Paul in their manner and authority. Paul calls them "super" in a facetious manner. They appeared to be more prosperous, maybe better speakers, more popular, but actually had no true substance as preachers of the gospel.

So Paul promoted a different way, that of humility not self promotion. Some even criticised him for his humility, suggesting it was a sign of weakness, but we know it is a characteristic that is central to the life of any Christian aiming to serve God. This is where Paul speaks of the thorn in the flesh, assumed to be some physical affliction that he does not expand on, but this was something that kept

him grounded in his life and service. Possibly as a reminder of his humanity that made him realise, that whatever wonderful spiritual experiences he had, his work was still to be done here in the physical world, where he had to live within the confines of human limitations and weakness.

People who like to boast about their money or their possessions are probably very materialistic in their outlook and get a sense of security from what they have. Having more and more things makes them feel strong and powerful. But what did Paul say about power. "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses." This is a statement that turns the world view on its head. Who ever boasts about their weaknesses, their failures. Oh, I had a great round of golf yesterday, went round in 156 shots, lost 15 balls in the lake. No, to gain power, we must humble ourselves completely so we rely on nothing from the material world, but totally on the grace of God. Graham Kendrick puts it much better than I can. "Only by grace can we enter, Only by grace can we stand. Not by our human endeavour, But by the blood of the Lamb". The more reliant we are on material things, the harder it can be to rely on Gods grace. But Gods grace, which starts with the forgiveness paid for on the cross, cannot be earned, it comes by emptying ourselves of the things that anchor us to this world, so we can be ready to receive his gifts. Nothing turns the world view on its head more than the cross – a place a humiliation, torture and death became the source of salvation for the world. Strength from utter weakness!

So what if we are tempted to boast about our lives, our achievements, our possessions. Remember that ultimately everything we have comes from God, so it really isn't ours to boast about anyway. The words of the Lords Prayer - Give us each day our daily bread is a simple way to remember this.

What if we are tempted to boast about spiritual experiences and gifts. Remember that God gives these to each of us in different ways – his gifts are tailored to our lives. Sharing our experiences is of course fine but we don't boast of them by telling others in order to make us feel superior. They are not given so we boast about them, but that we use them, we put our gifts and experiences into practice. And we know the warnings that Jesus gives to those who do not use what they are given in his services in parables like the talents.

And don't forget humility. That was ultimately the lesson of the story I began with. We are, after all, servants. That doesn't mean we are slaves, with no choice in what we do, for we are free, and we can freely choose to follow the way of Jesus. But we must do this, knowing that it won't be easy – hardship, calamity, persecution may all follow, but in these times when we have no strength to call on, in our weakness, God is strong.

One final thing to remember is that when you have a materialistic outlook, it is so easy to take everything you have for granted. Something that helps us to avoid this is to be thankful, be thankful for what we have because we don't really earn anything, but everything we have is provided through the grace of God. In my house group on Monday this last week, we were studying being thankful in prayer and learned that many people, even the Archbishop of Canterbury, find thankful prayer hard. We made a conscious effort in our prayer time at the end of the evening to make sure that we gave thanks for as many things as we asked God about. This helps us not to take God for granted.

At the end of that evening, the words of our next song were going round and round in my head. But they both remind us about thankfulness, and Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12 – Let the weak say I am strong, because of what the Lord has done for us.

Song. STF 78. Give thanks with a grateful heart

Give thanks with a grateful heart  
Give thanks to the Holy One  
Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son

Give thanks with a grateful heart  
Give thanks to the Holy One  
Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son

And now let the weak say , "I am strong"  
Let the poor say, "I am rich  
Because of what the Lord has done for us"

And now let the weak say, "I am strong"  
Let the poor say, "I am rich  
Because of what the Lord has done for us"

Prayers. Our prayers this morning will be based around the Hymn , Father hear the prayer we offer, interspersed around some short prayers.

1 Father, hear the prayer we offer:  
not for ease that prayer shall be,  
but for strength that we may ever  
live our lives courageously.

Father we come first in a Spirit of thankfulness, because of what you have done for us. We don't always find it easy to give thanks, for we so easily take for granted all we have. But we thank you today for our salvation, which was bought for a price, the death of your only son, and for the gift of forgiveness that was the consequence of his sacrifice. And on this day, we give thanks for the work of preachers in our Churches, who give up their time to share the message of the Good news. In the last 18 months, this has been difficult with people having to learn new skills to be able to communicate, but with your support, this work has continued.

2 Not for ever in green pastures  
do we ask our way to be;  
but the steep and rugged pathway  
may we tread rejoicingly.

So Lord, we acknowledge that the way of a servant can be a difficult one. The path forward can be difficult and hard to follow. As the world continues to navigate the way through the Covid pandemic, help us all to realise it is not over yet, and this is no time for the world to relax. We thank you for the success of vaccination and the advances made in development of medicines but we are a long way off completing this programme and pray that leaders across the world will continue to cooperate to ensure the fastest, safest and fairest roll out for vaccination.

3 Not for ever by still waters  
would we idly rest and stay;  
but would smite the living fountains  
from the rocks along our way.

As we do move forward in anticipation of being able to fully open up our Churches again in the Autumn, we pray that we will be reinvigorated by your Holy Spirit to new acts of mission and service. Many activities have been on hold for the last year, but this has been a time to reflect on the life of our Churches. As we plan new activities, help us to be bold in our outlook because we have power within us which we underestimate. And we pray for those of our fellowship who may find it hard to come back to somewhere full of people, having spent so long in isolation. Help us to look out for people such as these, for we want everyone to be brought back into our congregation and feel safe and secure.

4 Be our strength in hours of weakness,  
in our wanderings be our guide;  
through endeavour, failure, danger,  
Father, be there at our side

Lord, we have already acknowledged that the road ahead may be hard, and we may feel we are too weak to cope. So we thank you that we have been reminded that in weakness, we can find your strength and that we should seek the way of a servant, and not to seek to boast of our achievements and experiences. We will fail sometimes, but help us not to be defeated but learn and grow and persevere for we are never alone. Help us to encourage each other and remind us that your grace is sufficient to meet all our needs.

Repeat V1

1 Father, hear the prayer we offer:  
not for ease that prayer shall be,  
but for strength that we may ever  
live our lives courageously.

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

Closing song. How deep the Fathers love for us

How deep the Father's love for us,  
How vast beyond all measure,  
That He should give His only Son  
To make a wretch His treasure.  
How great the pain of searing loss –  
The Father turns His face away,  
As wounds which mar the Chosen One  
Bring many sons to glory.

Behold the man upon a cross,  
My sin upon His shoulders;  
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice  
Call out among the scoffers.  
It was my sin that held Him there  
Until it was accomplished;  
His dying breath has brought me life –  
I know that it is finished.

I will not boast in anything,  
No gifts, no power, no wisdom;  
But I will boast in Jesus Christ,  
His death and resurrection.  
Why should I gain from His reward?  
I cannot give an answer;  
But this I know with all my heart –  
His wounds have paid my ransom.