

## **Service at Home Sheet for Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> September 2021**

prepared by Pat Fry

**Theme: ' Perfect love casts out fear'**

**Prayer:** As I join in this act of worship, help me to be aware that I am not alone, for others are joining in this same act of worship, though in different places at different times. Help me to be aware that your love surrounds me, as it surrounds them, and together we are invited to take time to rest in your love. Amen

### **Hymn StF 3**

**Eternal God, your love's tremendous glory  
cascades through life in overflowing grace,**  
to tell creation's meaning in the story  
of love evolving love from time and space.

Eternal Son of God, uniquely precious,  
in you, deserted, scorned and crucified,  
God's love has fathomed sin and death's deep  
darkness and flawed humanity is glorified.

Eternal Spirit, with us like a mother,  
embracing us in love serene and pure:  
you nurture strength to follow Christ our  
brother;  
as full-grown children, confident and sure.

Love's Trinity, self-perfect, self-sustaining;  
love which commands, enables and obeys:  
you give yourself, in boundless joy, creating,  
one vast, increasing harmony of praise.

We ask you now, complete your image in us;  
this love of yours, our source & guide & goal.  
May love in us, seek love and serve love's  
purpose,  
till we ascend with Christ and find love whole.

Alan Gaunt (b.1935)

### **Prayer of Thanksgiving**

Today, dear God, I want to thank you for the freedoms I enjoy: everyday freedoms I take for granted; freedom to choose how to spend my time, what to eat, what to wear, what to watch on television. Of course it's not limitless

freedom, I have duties and responsibilities that demand attention; I have to consider what I can afford, what to leave out when there isn't time to do everything I want, and health problems and disabilities can be very restricting. But thank you for the choices I can make freely.

Thank you that I live in a country where I am free to express my views, ask questions, cast my vote, and most of all live out my faith without interference from government. I know I owe a debt to people in the past who fought sacrificially for these freedoms I often take for granted. Dear God, help me to use my freedom to choose wisely. Amen

### **Introduction to Bible Story**

This week's lectionary readings from the Old Testament are from the Book of Esther; a book we seldom read; a book that does not mention God at all, but whose underlying message is that God is looking out for his people, and raised up the right person at the right time to save his people from massacre.

I could not recall the story of Esther, just that it was about a brave Jewish woman in Exile. So rather than reading a few snippets from the Bible story, I am going to summarise the whole story. It has all the ingredients of a Hollywood blockbuster: a despotic king who makes hasty, thoughtless decisions; an arrogant power-hungry prime minister; an under-valued loyal servant; a glamorous beauty contest, exploitation of women, palace intrigue, racism and persecution, a beautiful queen whose courage and ingenuity prevent a bloodbath, and finally the downfall of the villain.

So, sit back, exercise your imagination and enjoy a gripping tale.

The story is set in Persia, where many Jews have been taken in Exile, but have settled, some even working in the royal household.

The King is angry with his Queen, because she has ignored his summons to a banquet where he wants to show her off to his guests. His prime minister advises him to dismiss her as an example, affirming that a husband has the right to command instant obedience from his wives. The King does so, but then wants a suitable replacement.

Beautiful women throughout the land are groomed for a year and then presented to the king for him to make his choice. Esther is chosen to be the new queen. Unbeknown to the king, she is a Jewish girl, an orphan who has been brought up and cared for by her older cousin Mordecai. Mordecai is a humble member of the royal household, who had earlier uncovered a plot to assassinate the king, and passed on the information so that the would-be assassins were intercepted before any harm was done.

The power-hungry prime minister, Haman, demands that everyone bow to him but Mordecai refuses and, in revenge, Haman persuades the king it is in his interest to issue an order that all Jews are to be killed on a set date. Horrified, Mordecai stands at the gate of the palace making a display of his grief. Queen Esther sends a messenger to find out what is wrong and Mordecai urges her to beg the king to change his mind.

At first Esther is too afraid; only those invited can enter the king's presence without risking the death penalty. But compassion for her people compel her to take action and she tells Mordecai to order the Jewish people to fast and pray for her. Only after that does she go to the doorway of the presence chamber, waits till the king invites her in and then she invites him and the prime minister to a lavish, exclusive banquet. The king is delighted, and after the meal asks her what she would like and she, careful not to rush things, replies, I would like you both to come again tomorrow.

That night the king cannot sleep; he recalls that his life was saved by someone in the household but he cannot remember if the man was ever rewarded. On being told it was Mordecai, the prime minister is ordered to give great honours on Mordecai, the man he had been determined to destroy.

At the second meeting, Queen Esther explains that she and her people are about to be killed. The king immediately orders the death penalty for the man who dared to make such an order against his beautiful queen. So the prime minister is condemned to the death he had planned for Mordecai. Now the story takes a nasty turn. The king goes on to say it is impossible to rescind the order, but instead gives the Jews absolute right to defend themselves against the people who are carrying out the royal instruction to kill the Jews. In the ensuing bloodbath the Jews slaughter their enemies.

To the Jews this is a story of God delivering his people through his servant, Esther, and is celebrated every year at the Festival of Purim. For us that raises some difficult questions, particularly the ending of the story.

Perhaps the two messages we should take from the story are that compassion for her people inspired Esther to put her own life at risk to save them - and that supportive prayer can be enabling.

Take time to ponder situations you know of where love or compassion have inspired courageous action, or less dramatically but just as importantly, patient care in exhausting, draining circumstances, maybe continuing for many years.

Take time to reflect on the times when you, or someone you know well, have experienced the support of other people's prayers.

Take time to thank God for those memories.

## Prayer of Confession

Loving God, there's a lot in this story of Esther that is strange to our culture. It would be easy to disregard it because of so much that is strange to us. Yet we know Jewish people have drawn comfort and confidence from it in times of hardship.

We know there is a lot wrong in our society today; we see greed, envy, prejudice, pride and a reluctance to stand up for what is right. While our own failures, our wrongdoing, maybe less dramatic, nonetheless there are times when our pride, our selfishness, our careless words, or reluctance to speak out get in the way of your good purpose. So we confess that we fall short of what in our best moments we know to be right. In the quiet we make our own confession and ask for the assurance of your forgiveness and your renewing power. We pray that we may learn to let compassion overrule our hesitancy, our apathy, our unwillingness to stand out from the crowd; that we may show your love in the way we live, in the name of Jesus, Amen.

## Hymn StF 720

**We turn to you O God of every nation**  
giver of good, and origin of life;  
your love is at the heart of all creation,  
your hurt is people's pain in war and death.

We turn to you, that we may be forgiven  
for crucifying Christ on earth again;  
we know that we have never wholly striven  
to share with all the promise of your reign.

Free every heart from haughty self-reliance.  
Our ways of thought inspire with simple  
grace;  
break down among us barriers of defiance;  
speak to the soul of all the human race.

On all who work on earth for right relations  
we pray the light of love from hour to hour.  
Grant wisdom to the leaders of the nations,  
the gift of carefulness to those in power.

Teach us good Lord to serve the needs of  
others;  
help us to give and not to count the cost.  
Unite us all to live as sisters, brothers;  
defeat our Babel with your Pentecost!

Fred Kaan (1929-2009)

## New Testament Reading: 1 John 4:7-21

### Prayers for Others and for Ourselves

*First a prayer for the people Afghanistan, then time to pray for people we know personally, and finally today's prayer from the Prayer Handbook written by our Chair of District, Andrew de Ville.*

*Having thought about freedom, our hearts go out to those whose freedom has been taken from them in Afghanistan, we pray using words from the Christian Aid website:*

O God of mercy and peace,  
we hold before you the peoples of  
Afghanistan.  
Be living bread to those who are hungry each  
day.  
Be healing and wholeness to those who have  
no access to health care amidst the ravages of  
pandemic  
Be their true home to all who have been  
displaced .  
Be open arms of loving acceptance to those  
who fear because of their gender, ethnicity,  
religious or political views .  
Bring peace to those engaged in armed  
conflict and those who live within its shadow.  
Give wisdom to the United Nations, and to  
humanitarian organisations as they seek to  
respond.  
Open our eyes to see you in all acts of  
compassionate care.  
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who  
emptied himself of all but love in order to  
bring life in all its fullness. Amen

**Turning closer to home we bring before God our concern for people we know** whose lives are restricted by illness, disability, addiction, exhaustion, or despair . . . . .

(hold individuals in your mind’s eye)

if we are called to bring your light to one such situation, whether it’s just the right friendly word, a phone call, or a more demanding role, help us to respond with warmth and wisdom. Amen.

**From the Prayer Handbook**

Gracious and Loving God, thank you for staying close to us in all that we have experienced in recent times. As your holy people we ask you to strengthen us with wisdom and understanding as we look forward to the new opportunities you will share with us. Encourage us to offer rich hospitality; to recognise the individual, welcome the stranger, and offer a community of love for all. Amen

**The Lord’s Prayer**

I have chosen a final hymn that fits the theme but I have a problem with it. For years it was one of my favourite hymns but now, while I love much of it, I have difficulty with four lines. Maybe I have misunderstood the writer’s intention. While much of the hymn faces reality squarely, there are a few lines which seem to me to turn a blind eye to the appalling suffering in this world. So I am offering it with a few lines of my own shown in italics; they are not such good poetry, but they do resonate with my experience in a way the original does not.

**Hymn 103 God is love let heaven adore Him**

God is Love, let earth rejoice,  
Let creation bow before Him  
And exalt Him with one voice.  
He who laid the earth’s foundation,  
He who spread the heavens above,  
He who breathes through all creation  
He is love eternal love.

God is Love, and he enfolding  
all the world *within his care*  
*calls us to live his compassion*  
*for all people everywhere.*  
And when human hearts are breaking  
under sorrow’s iron rod,  
then we find that self-same aching  
deep within the heart of God.

God is Love, and though with blindness  
sin afflicts each human soul  
God’s eternal loving kindness  
*strives to heal, to make us whole.*  
Sin and death and hell shall never  
o’er us final triumph gain;  
God is Love, so love for ever  
o’er the universe must reign.

Timothy Rees (1874-1939) altd, italics P Fry

**Blessing:**

God be our comfort and our strength .  
God be our hope and support. ,  
God be our light and our way.  
And the blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer,  
and Giver of Life  
Be with us now and for ever. **Amen**

(Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia )

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