

**Service at Home sheet:  
Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2024  
Prepared by Pat Fry and Lisa Ball**

Today's service has been jointly prepared by me, Pat Fry, and Lisa Ball. Lisa is a member at The United Church Winchester, worshipping with us every Sunday, online because of health issues. Lisa has studied theology, and had almost completed her training as an Anglican Lay Minister when illness prevented her from continuing. I am delighted that Lisa has contributed a prayer and her reflections on a familiar story from Acts, which is one of today's lectionary readings.

Take a moment to focus your thoughts;

**Prayer**

Lord, I am here, Help me to put aside distractions and be fully present in this moment.

Lord, You are here, Help me to let this truth flow into my soul.

Lord, we are here together, so this is a time of blessing. Amen

**Hymn 134 Christ whose glory fills the skies:**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjB\\_bKGhkM4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjB_bKGhkM4)

Christ whose glory fills the skies,  
Christ the true the only light  
Sun of righteousness arise  
scatter all the shades of night.  
Daystar from on high be near,  
Daystar in my heart appear.

Dark and cheerless is the morn  
unaccompanied by thee,  
joyless is the days return  
till thy merc's beams I see,  
till they inward light impart  
glad my eyes and warm my heart.

Visit then this soul of mine  
pierce the gloom of sin and grief ;  
fill me radiancy divine,  
scatter all my unbelief;  
more and more thyself display  
shining to the perfect day .

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

**Prayer of thanksgiving**

Gracious God, we thank you for unexpected treasures, moments that brighten our lives: the kindness of a stranger, an unexpected phone call or letter from a friend, a sunny interval on a dull day, an uplifting tune on the radio, the satisfaction of completing a difficult puzzle. Seemingly small things in themselves, yet transforming moments. Help us to take time to treasure such moments and allow them to remind us of your Spirit's presence in ordinary places, and in surprising ways.

Take a moment to reflect on something good in your experience this week, and give thanks.

**Bible Reading: Acts Chapter 8 verse26-40**

When you were younger it is very probable that some very unexpected things happened in your life that you would never have predicted. When these things did happen you may have had to pinch yourself to check they were real; I know that I have done that and I'm pretty sure you will have had to check that the experience was real too! I am talking about any sort of extremely unlikely situation you may have found yourself in.

This is what struck me when I was pondering this passage. Surely neither Philip nor the Ethiopian eunuch could ever imagined that they would discuss the Hebrew Scriptures with a complete stranger from another country in a chariot- a very unlikely set of circumstances indeed! But how did it come about?

Acts tells us that Philip was prompted by an Angel of the Lord – well that was very extraordinary for sure, and what the angel prompted him to do was very extraordinary too. This is just so marvellous – literally so! God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.

So, what can we learn from this passage? I think it comes as a reminder that the Creator can do things that we could never imagine, in ways we could never imagine, and for reasons we couldn't have imagined either! We limit God so much. At the moment that

the Ethiopian Eunuch was struggling so hard to make sense of the Book of Isaiah someone who had the ability to help him just happened to be there. Well, that wasn't a coincidence, as we know from Acts. But what if Philip had said, 'Who, me? I can't talk to him, and why on earth would he listen to me anyway?....' It would be understandable if he had reacted that way – I wonder if he had ever spoken to someone who looked so richly dressed and was so different to the people he generally mixed with. There is a lot that could be said about whether in his younger days he would even have wanted to speak to someone who seemed so 'other'. But it seems that God just doesn't see any difficulty at all and just goes straight to the point – this person needs help, and this is the one to help him. I think this passage points to us really needing to be open and willing to do what we never thought we could or would if we feel prompted by the Holy Spirit. How God might prompt you is as individual as you are. God knows you and you being willing to serve him and to be a channel of his peace is all that matters.

### Prayer

Beloved God, who is the Lord of all but cares about the sparrows and the grass of the field which is here today and gone tomorrow, thank- you for your love and for reaching out to us wherever we are. You meet us in simple and surprising places with everyday and extraordinary encounters. Today we ponder the amazing and life changing encounter with Philip that the Ethiopian Eunuch had when studying your word. He must have been amazed and his life was certainly changed from that day. Help us to be aware and alert to the way You might seek to draw alongside us and to be prepared to be amazed by the way You choose to do it. Let us not block out Your still small voice. Help us to tune our hearts to Your voice and so be comforted, strengthened and uplifted by your presence always. Help us all also to be aware of the possibility that we can be a channel of your

peace through the power of The Holy Spirit to those whose lives in some way touch ours.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ who spent so much of his earthly ministry reaching out to those who society had decided were not good enough to be noticed, tolerated or accepted. Amen.

### **Hymn158: Lord you sometimes speak in wonders:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBQ-ql7Xbv8>

Lord you sometimes speak in wonders,  
unmistakeable and clear,  
mighty signs that show your presence,  
overcoming doubt and fear.  
O Lord you sometimes speak in wonders.

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

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.  
O Lord you sometimes speak on silence.

Lord you often speak in Scripture,  
words that summon from the page,  
shown and taught us by your Spirit  
with fresh light for every age.  
O Lord you sometimes speak through  
Scripture.

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.  
O Lord you always speak through Jesus.

Christopher Idle (b.1938)

I love this hymn, but I feel it misses out one significant way we often experience a word from God; here's my attempt to start a new verse:

Lord you sometimes speak through people.  
Showing you in how they care.....

## **Prayers for others**

We take time to bring to God our concern for the issues we hear about in the news, and for people we know in particular need.

In the Easter Offering service held last Sunday at Romsey we were challenged to think about the victims of injustice.

So, Gracious God we bring to our worries and our concern for people living with the consequences of injustice. The international news is deeply shocking, and we want to pray for people who are hurting – the injured, the dying, the bereaved, the displaced, all who are suffering the consequences of war and injustice.

We pray for those in authority, those whose responsibility it is to try to bring an end to hostilities and ensure a just and lasting peace.

We pray for those who are working to alleviate suffering, often at great personal risk.

And we take time to hold before God people we know in particular need.....

We bring our prayers together, uniting with our Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world saying the prayer that Jesus taught us, using whatever form or language is most appropriate.

**Our Father.....**

Our Gospel reading today also thinks about connections, first and foremost with Jesus, and also connections with each other.

## **Reading: John 15:1-8**

There are two pictures that come to mind when I read this passage.

The first I see every day. I live in a small development of eight houses tucked in behind the bungalows facing the road, built on what had been exceptionally long back gardens. Beside the driveway between the old houses is a long bed with shrubs. The developer appears to have bought a job lot of random plants and put them in willy-nilly

with no regard for how they would grow or the care they would need. Amongst them two olive trees and two vines. Unsupported the vines trailed across the ground, smothering flowers and straggling on to the roadway, a tripping hazard for pedestrians, a real nuisance. Two years ago my son, a keen gardener instructed me to cut them back hard in the autumn, to a few strong shoots from the main stem cut back to about one foot. The result? Strong healthy vines that could be trained back against the fence, bearing good fruit for the first time. Pruning can seem harsh, but it has its place.

The second picture is of a newish vineyard on the South Downs I passed several times on a walking holiday. The young vines were in neat rows, supported by a framework of posts and wires with plenty of room to grow, and plenty of access to light. As well as good roots, good weather and good pruning mentioned in the Bible passage, they benefitted from the right support, not too restrictive, but enough to enable them to grow and flourish. Perhaps that is a good image both for the self-discipline we need, and for the support of the church fellowship. The old tradition of regular worship and regular prayer-time can be a great support, but it does not need to become an overly restrictive regime. Within our church fellowship we must give people space to be themselves, allow for different interpretations and ways of doing things, whilst at the same time being a supportive community. Easy to say in theory, a difficult balance to achieve in practice. As always we must look to Jesus to show us the way, reflecting on what he did in his time and applying his principles appropriately for our different society.

I have chosen to use a reflection from the URC prayer handbook to lead us to meditate on the reading.

## **Prayer**

Lord we thank you for the delicious fruits of the vine: a bunch of grapes, a packet of raisings, a glass of wine, made possible by good soil, deep spreading roots, careful pruning, sun and rain.

Lord Jesus, the Vine, whose deep roots nourish us, and from whose branches we receive comforting grace to love you, resolution to follow you, and moral strength to serve you, prune our selfishness, our complacency, our pride and bitterness, so that we may live to serve you today and every day.

Root us deeply in love for those in need: in joy that knows you are always with us; and peace that overcomes hostility, anger and bitterness; in patience to persevere and kindness in word and action; and generosity in sharing time, talents and money; in faithfulness in serving our neighbours; in gentleness that treats everyone with care and respect ; in self-control so that we never cause harm to others; Christ the Vine, growing in you may we bear fruit.

David Batchelor, URC Prayer Handbook. United Reformed Church 2024, copyright with permission, (altd)

## **Hymn 545: Be thou my vision**

<https://youtu.be/DoFvVw8Lby4>

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,  
Nought be all else to me save that thou art.  
Be thou my best thought in the day and the night  
In waking and sleeping thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,  
Be thou ever with me and I with thee Lord:

Be thou my great Father, thy child let me be,  
Be thou in me dwelling and I one with thee.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight,  
Be thou my whole armour be thou my true might  
Be thou my soul's shelter be thou my strong tower,  
O raise thou me heavenward, great power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,  
Be thou mine inheritance, now and always.  
Be thou and thou only the first in my heart.  
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright sun  
O grant me its joys after victory is won.  
True heart of my own heart, whatever befall  
still be thou my vision O Ruler of all.

Irish 8<sup>th</sup> century, translated Mary Elizabeth Byrne  
1880-1931 versified Eleanor Henrietta Hull 1860-1935  
altd.

## **Blessing**

May God bless us;  
May Jesus bring us peace and joy in believing;  
May we rest in the Spirit's care and reflect  
God's love in our daily lives. Amen.

adapted from Iona Wee Worship Book

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