

Welcome

Today feels very exciting as we take a fresh look at the purpose of God's church and try, together to discern God's plans.

Reading Psalm 100 GNT

Sing to the Lord, all the world!

Worship the Lord with joy;
come before him with happy songs!

Acknowledge that the Lord is God.
He made us, and we belong to him;
we are his people, we are his flock.

Enter the Temple gates with thanksgiving;
go into its courts with praise.
Give thanks to him and praise him.

The Lord is good;
his love is eternal
and his faithfulness lasts forever.

Songs/prayers

Song:

Come, people of the risen King, who delight to bring him praise.
Come, all and tune your hearts to sing to the morning star of grace.
From the shifting shadows of the earth we will lift our eyes to him,
Where steady arms of mercy reach to gather children in.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice!
One heart, one voice, O church of Christ, rejoice!

Come, those whose joy is morning sun, and those weeping through the night.
Come, those who tell of battles won, and those struggling in the fight.
For his perfect love will never change and his mercies never cease,
But follow us through all our days with the certain hope of peace.

Come, young and old from every land, men and women of the faith.
Come, those with full or empty hands, find the riches of his grace.
Over all the world his people sing - shore to shore we hear them call
The truth that cries through every age: 'Our God is all in all!'

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Prayer:

Lord we, your people gather today to recognise your greatness and your faithfulness and to listen for your voice. We praise and thank you for who you are and for all that you have done for us. Today we ask that you would speak through the noise and chaos of our lives

as we open our hearts and minds to experience your holy presence - Lord we long to see you...

Song:

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord,
Open the eyes of my heart.
I want to see you,
I want to see you.
(repeat)

To see you high and lifted up,
Shining in the light of your glory.
Pour out your power and love,
As we sing holy, holy, holy.

Holy, holy, holy
Holy, holy, holy,
Holy, holy, holy,
I want to see You.

Paul Baloche © 1997 Integrity Hosanna! Music

Prayer:

Jesus, Holy Lord, as we come to seek your ways for us, help us to recognise you as the one and only true God who is worthy of all our praise and all our love. Forgive us the times when we have withheld our time and resources, putting our own desires and comfort before that of others and failing to follow you as you have called us to do - thank you Lord that, as the Bible reminds us, you are gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and that you offer us forgiveness when we turn once again to you. Help us, rather than pursuing our own plans and ambitions, to surrender freely and wholeheartedly to your will, trusting that you have plans for good and not for harm, plans to give us a future and a hope...

Song:

Jesus, lover of my soul,
All consuming fire is in your gaze.
Jesus, I want you to know
I will follow you all my days.
For no one else in history is like you,
And history itself belongs to you.
Alpha and Omega, you have loved me,
And I will share eternity with you.

It's all about you, Jesus,
And all this is for you,
For your glory and your fame.
It's not about me,
As if you should do things my way;
You alone are God,
And I surrender to your ways.

Paul Oakley © 1995 Thankyou Music

Readings

Acts 2:43-47

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Ephesians 4:1-16

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Talk

God's people gather in a variety of places and settings - if we were to ask any number of people what church means to them, we would get any number of different answers, but the fact remains that the church is God's idea and that he has plans for it - Matthew 16:18 says, 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build *my* church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.' No matter what the building looks like or how the worship, discipleship and other aspects of church life are organised, we must be absolutely committed to what God wants His church to be. And there I think we come across the root of many of the problems the church encounters today - we've lost sight of just what it is that God wants His church to be, and become so focussed on deciding what we think it should be that we do not take time to listen for His voice, calling and directing us. It's interesting to note that God never intended to provide us with a 'one size fits all' recipe for being church. If we take a look at the early church in Jerusalem as described in the book of Acts, we hear that the people met every day in the temple courts, they ate together in their homes and praised God with thankful hearts. They must have been doing something right here as 'the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved'. Then in Acts 11, we

hear of the church in Antioch where Paul and Barnabus taught the people, encouraging them to 'remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion', again it seems, a simple recipe for success as 'a great number became believers and turned to the Lord'. By the time we reach the end of the New Testament, if we look at Revelation chapters 2 and 3, it is obvious that each local church had developed unique characteristics, no doubt influenced by their own particular circumstances. By this time we can see that many had drifted from their initial devotion and commitment to the Lord, being enticed away by the attractions and temptations of the world around them, or simply becoming weary in their efforts to serve God and one another.

And so it continues today - from mega-churches to house-churches, God's people meet in different ways, with different priorities, sometimes declaring that their way is the right way, but sadly, often having lost their passion for the Lord and his purposes for them. Perhaps it's time for us to spend less of our energy pondering what we can do to make our churches more attractive and more successful and to simply seek God, committing ourselves to whatever God wants His church to be, and making sure that He is the sole focus of our worship. In 2 Chronicles 7:14 God says, 'If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land'. I believe that if we will humble ourselves, pray and seek God's face, turning from our wicked ways, then he will hear us, and heal our churches and our world.

I've heard many disparaging comments about 'the church' - sadly some of them may well be justified - and I have sometimes told people, 'Don't let the church put you off God', for after all we are imperfect people who do not always follow the Lord as he calls us to do. You may have heard the quote attributed to Billy Graham, 'If you find a perfect church don't join it: You'd spoil it'. But we must not give up! The concept of a community of believers is there throughout Scripture, from God's first calling out of 'His people'. The Bible uses the following words in describing the church: people, body, household, and family, and it is obvious from Scripture that God wants His people to grow and mature within a community of unity and togetherness, sharing love for Him and for one another. It was never God's intention for His followers to practice their faith in a vacuum away from other believers and many of us know from experience that we really do need one another. Even if we are not physically able to come together for whatever reason, we still need to keep in contact with one another by whatever means we can, to help us learn, to encourage us, to challenge us and keep us on track, together becoming all that God plans and longs for us to be.

We do not need to do things the way others do them, and we do not need to continue doing the things our predecessors have been doing, in fact Jesus never gave us a blueprint for 'being church' - he didn't give any practical guidance as to how we should organise our communities or our community activities, but he did tell us that, above all else, we must love God and love one another. He also prayed shortly before his death for our unity, asking that we might be one with Him, with the Father, and with each other, so that the world may believe that God sent Him.

The apostle Paul of course gives us such a helpful image of how the body of Christ should be, with Christ as its head, as we heard from chapter 4 of his letter to the Ephesians. Let's just remind ourselves of some of these verses. He says, 'Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is

one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.....' and he goes on to say, 'Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ'. He emphasises that 'every part' of the body must do its work in making sure the body matures in this way and the value of all these parts is also described in his first letter to the church in Corinth.

The church is complex, it is challenging at times and far from perfect - but it is a wonderful expression of the body of Christ himself and therefore demands our attention, our commitment and our determination to allow Jesus to work through us to make it the best it can possibly be. So today, as part of an ongoing process, we continue listening to God, sharing the ways in which he has spoken to us, and considering just which part, or parts of the body we are called to be, remembering that each one is of significant value. The church was never intended to be a 'spectator sport' where people show up on Sunday mornings to watch others perform, but rather a body in which everyone is encouraged to play their part in serving the Lord.

So what of the purpose of the church? There are those who say the local church exists for evangelism and that reaching those who do not know Jesus should drive everything the church does. Others might say that discipleship is the primary purpose of the church and should put all its energy into developing and producing mature followers of Christ. Surely we can't have one without the other and a balanced view is more helpful if the body of Christ is to grow and flourish as God intends, reaching others with the love of Jesus, and discipling all to a point of maturity in Him.

We take some time now to focus on the presence of God, to share with him some of the things that are on our minds, and to listen for his voice speaking into our lives.

Song

Jesus, all for Jesus;
all I am and have
and ever hope to be.
Jesus, all for Jesus;
all I am and have
and ever hope to be.

All of my ambitions, hopes and plans
I surrender these
into your hands.
All of my ambitions, hopes and plans
I surrender these
into your hands.

*For it's only in your will that I am free,
for it's only in your will that I am free.*

Jesus, all for Jesus;
all I am and have
and ever hope to be.

Jennifer Atkinson & Robin Mark
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Prayers

Lord we take a few moments to lay before you the concerns we have for ourselves, for others, and for the wider world, thankful that you invite us to come to you and find rest and peace....

For all these people and situations, Lord we ask that your Holy Spirit would be at work, bringing healing, justice, peace and hope.

And now loving God, we pause in the silence and listen for your voice whispering into our hearts and minds, surrendering all our ambitions, hope and plans into your hands.....

Jesus, all for Jesus, all we are and have and ever hope to be.

(Repeat words of song)

We may feel that we are just a bunch of ordinary people who cannot really make much difference in this crazy world, but when we come together as one, standing strong and loving God and one another, then a new day will dawn, a day of peace and justice and joy when God's kingdom is evident in every time and place. St John's is a wonderful army of God's people who are called to pursue God's vision and to serve his purpose together.

Song

An army of ordinary people,
A kingdom where love is the key,
A city, a light to the nations,
Heirs to the promise are we.
A people whose life is in Jesus,
A nation together we stand.
Only through grace are we worthy,
Inheritors of the land.

*A new day is dawning,
A new age to come,
When the children of promise
Shall flow together as one.
A truth long neglected,
But the time has now come
When the children of promise
Shall flow together as one.*

A people without recognition,
But with Him a destiny sealed,
Called to a heavenly vision,
His purpose shall be fulfilled.
Come, let us stand strong together,
Abandon ourselves to the King,
His love shall be ours for ever,
This victory song we shall sing.

Dave Bilbrough © 1983 Thankyou Music

Blessing

We long to serve your purpose, loving heavenly Father, and so we commit ourselves to listening for your voice and responding to your prompting so that we may stand strong together, allowing ourselves to be built into the church you intend us to be.

May the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord look on you with kindness and give you peace. Amen