

Welcome & Call to Worship: -

Loving God, We are here in the name of Christ.

We come to bow our heads, to lift up our hearts and to offer you our praise.

We come to confess Jesus Christ as Lord, to enthroned him in our lives,
and to offer him our commitment.

We come to seek his will, to hear his word, and to receive his blessing.

Help us to bear his name faithfully, and live out each day, to glory of his name. Amen.

Hymn: - STF 443 – Come Let us sing of a wonderful Love

1 Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,
tender and true;
out of the heart of the Father above,
streaming to me and to you:
wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

2 Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,
joyfully came;
came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,
sharing their sorrow and shame;
seeking the lost,
saving, redeeming at measureless cost.

3 Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;
why do they roam?
Love only waits to forgive and forget;
home, weary wanderer, home!
Wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

4 Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,
come and abide,
lifting my life, till it rises above
envy and falsehood and pride;
seeking to be
lowly and humble, a learner of thee.

Robert Walmsley (1831–1905)

Prayer of Confession: -

Let us confess our sins to God:

For our foolishness and our thoughtless use of the gifts of your creation, Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

For our neglect of you, and our failure to care for others, Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

For our selfishness in prayer and our carelessness in worship, Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Silence

Here is good news for all who put their trust in Christ.

Jesus says: 'Your sins are forgiven.'

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Readings:

Hebrews 13: 1 – 8, 15 -16:

Let mutual love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.^[a] ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has

said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." ⁶ So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" ⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ¹⁵ Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Luke 14: 1, 7 – 14:

On one occasion when Jesus^[a] was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ⁷ When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." ¹² He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Sermon

When was the Last time you had a party and invited lots of people to come to it?

For me, the last time was just over 5 years ago for Cora and I's wedding in Southwell Minster. There is an awful lot of planning involved in a wedding. There are family issues to be aware of. There are guests that wont or cant be sat next to each other. And the big question – just who is going to make it onto the "Top Table"!

Tired of the whole thing – Cora and I decided to just seat the My Mum & Dad, Cora's Mum & Dad, my Brother (the Best Man) and Wendy (Cora's Chief Bridesmaid) on the top table, and then we would have no seating plan for anyone else – they could just find a seat and enjoy themselves!!! Having invited so many family and friends – we couldn't guarantee that this decision would not be a disaster, but by the Grace of God – it was the most wonderful day, and trouble free Wedding Banquet.

Jesus declares, in our Reading from Luke, that when we fling open our doors and throw a party, when we reach out in ministry and mission, we have to be willing to take some risks – a bit like not having a seating plan at a wedding banquet! Success is not the measures forced onto us by the world, but gauged by Love, hospitality, humility and our ability to invite folks into the kingdom, into our fellowship.

And our reading from Hebrews reads like an 18th Century Manifesto for Wesley's club of Methodicals – called to share Gods Love, to serve and come alongside the poor, the inprisoned and oppressed, and to set them free with the Truth of Christ's love poured out for all, on the cross.

Be humble, be blessed, let love continue . . .

In our family growing up, on Christmas morning my Brother and I took it in turns each year to be "Santa's Helper", and whoever was picked for that role got to distribute all of the presents to the rest of the family. Although this never seemed a particularly fabulous role to be given when we were young – because after all it meant waiting until last to open those presents with your name on – as we grew older, it has become perhaps the most enjoyable part of our Christmas Celebrations.

There is something simply wonderful, frankly unbeatable & fun, about giving to others out of a sense of abundance. It seems that this feeling of freely inviting all and sundry to a feast, in a sense of abundant love, is at the heart of our passage from Luke this morning. Jesus, like so many other times it taking, head on, the social code and norms of his day, in particular he is focusing on this 'honour and shame' culture that was prevalent in his community. A practice that was acutely displayed at social meals.

The further away from the Host you sat – the less important you were to them, or the less important in the community the host felt you were! Like you see so often on the playgrounds of schools across the country – sadly – those relationships and that status of importance / friendship can be fragile and fickle – and can often change with the direction of the wind. Being exalted to the top table – came with many, significant benefits. Being demoted or shown to the lesser table – brought shame and could have affects on all aspects of your life. Such was the power of **Place** in the culture Jesus spoke to.

Jesus' advice was simple – **Don't think too highly of yourselves**. Better to start low, and be invited up. Because if you think your better than everyone else, and are shown to the lower table, that could be very troublesome for you and your family. **This** was the third Feast that Jesus attends in the home of the leader of the Pharisees, and Jesus would have been invited, and this was the kind of invitation you didn't refuse. Taking his opportunity, Jesus tells a parable. He declares that as guests arrive, did you notice the scramble for the seats as close as possible to the Top Table.

Making the point – that those who uplift themselves will be humbled. But those who humble themselves will be exalted. **This would** have seemed rather offensive to the guests of the feast that night. What would it mean for us as individuals, us as a church community, to take the lowest seat at the table? What would our church look like if it embraced humility, simplicity as its primary values?

But Jesus, being Jesus, he doesn't leave us with that challenging question. He hammers home the point by saying it is our job, our role, our calling - to **invite** the marginalised, the diseased, the challenged – those on the fringes of our community into the fellowship, to the Table of our Lord. Because – All are welcome in this place. All can be saved, and All can be saved to the uttermost. **We** have to remember, in all humility, that our membership of the kingdom has **everything** to do with how God sees us, and **nothing** to do with how we see ourselves. That I think is the key point of this whole passage.

Jesus' whole life is centered on inviting into the presence of God those who neither expect nor deserve such an invitation. And the long and short of it is, that Jesus expects us to do the same. We are called to turn our relative privilege into Blessings for all – That we might remember Jesus' invitation and command. That we might remember how much God has given us. That we might live differently as Christ's Children of Light. Nurturing a different kind of community, not founded on **status** but on **Grace**.

So finally, what does this mean for us here in Dorset South and West Methodist Circuit, as we some near the beginning of this new Methodist Church Year . . . As we gather around the table, with friends from across the circuit, we must remember our reading from Lukes Gospel. We must enter into the task of being Church in this 21st Century, with humility, with trust, grace and peace.

Seeking to build relationship, to understand where God is leading us, and what opportunities are being put before us to reach out in new ways, to build the kingdom, to invite new people to the table. And as I mentioned earlier, our passage from Hebrews reads like a Manifesto for the Methodist Church, in Wesley's time and in our time. We are called as a Methodist people in this town to share God's love, to come alongside the poor, the imprisoned, the oppressed, to set them free with the truth of Christ's love poured out for all on the cross.

So who are you going to invite to the party? Who are you going to walk alongside? Who are you going to share the stories of your faith with, this year? **Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Let us offer our prayer
with all God's people
through Jesus Christ our Lord
who ever lives to pray for us.

We pray for the needs of the world . . . We pray for the Church . . . We pray for all in trouble or distress . . .

We pray for all who make a new beginning today . . .

Silent prayer

God of compassion and mercy, listen to our prayer. To you, merciful God, through your Son,
in the life-giving Spirit, be glory and praise for ever. **Amen.**

Offering Prayer:

We bless you, God of all creation. We bring you our gifts, and our lives, Through your goodness
we have this bread and wine to offer also, which earth has given and human hands have made;
All for transformation through your grace and mercy Poured out through Jesus Christ, Our Lord and
Saviour. Amen.

Hymn – STF 186 – Tell our my soul

1 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

2 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm
has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name — the Lord, the Mighty One.

3 Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

4 Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926)

Based on the Magnificat Words: © Timothy Dudley-Smith

Blessing

God, go with us on our journey of faith,
Keep us travelling ever-onwards,
A pilgrim people,
Looking to Jesus Christ
Who has run the race before us,
And who waits to welcome us home.

The Blessing of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Be with you all,
With those you Love,
And those you are called to love,
Now in the name of Christ. Amen.

CCL Licence Number 178041