

Dorset South & West. Written Service.
Sunday May 4th 2025. Beacons of Hope.
Prepared by Revd Jean Quick.



Call to Worship. God has been our refuge and our strength.
A present help in time of trouble. **Amen.**

STF 1

All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice:
him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell;
come ye before him and rejoice.

The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;
without our aid he did us make:
we are his folk, he doth us feed;
and for his sheep he doth us take.

O enter then his gates with praise;
approach with joy his courts unto;

praise, laud, and bless his name always,
for it is seemly so to do.

For why, the Lord our God is good;
his mercy is for ever sure;
his truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.

To Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
the God whom heaven and earth adore,
from earth and from the angel host
be praise and glory evermore.

Prayers of adoration and confession

Our Gracious Father we have so much to offer to you in cheerful gratitude and praise today. We recall how we are soon to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe, when the sounds of war fell silent on this continent. We thank you for our peace that is undergirded by a knowledge of how much you infinitely love us and want us to enjoy all your many gifts. Not least the gift of inner peace and an absence from the horrors of war. You give a quality peace that the world cannot give or ever take away. We come in prayer conscious of our need for Your forgiveness for the sin and the desire to dominate others that leads to conflict between people, and war between nations. We who enjoy the peace you give can so easily destroy our own peace by our own actions and thoughts. Help us to see the good in all and to strive for peace.

Today we remember before you the many soldiers, sailors, and airmen and a multitude of others who served in so many peacekeeping ways. Those who gave their lives to restrain evil and oppose tyranny. We offer our thanksgiving for them and for the years of peace that we have enjoyed since the Second World War. We give our joyful thanks today, as those who gathered on that first Victory day, glad for the fellowship of humanity, and grateful for the laughter and love that follows times of sadness and loss. But above all things, we pray that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven, as we say the prayer that unites us all

The Lords Prayer.

Bible reading. Acts 9:1-6

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?", "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Reflection

On Thursday we will be commemorating the 80th anniversary of VE Day. A day planned to be full of celebrations, starting in the early morning with town crier's making proclamations and VE Day flags raised. At 6:30pm church bells will ring out and at 9.30pm over one thousand beacons and hundreds of Lamp Lights of Peace will be lit.

It's a day of mixed feelings. Many will not remember what it was like on that first VE Day. Many will be remembering those who paid the supreme sacrifice for our peace. Together, we will honour the past and celebrate a future built on unity, hope, love and peace. The commemorative celebration's will end with the singing of the hymn, "I Vow To Thee My Country." The hymn was written by a British diplomat called Sir Cecil Spring Rice. It's been a hymn that has evoked many strong feelings, from immense patriotism to strong hostility. Originally Spring Rice wrote the hymn to express how a Christian owed loyalty to both his homeland and the heavenly kingdom. He wrote it in 1918 and originally it's first verse was about the terrible carnage of World War I in which his brother Gerald had died and his desire to return home after years abroad.

“I heard my country calling,
away across the sea,
Across the waste of waters,
she calls and calls to me.
Her sword is girded at her side,
her helmet on her head,

And around her feet are lying
the dying and the dead;
I hear the noise of battle,
the thunder of her guns;
I haste to thee, my mother,
a son among thy sons.”

Cecil re wrote the words in 1918 rewording both verse's especially verse two that spoke about the terrible carnage of World War I in which his brother Gerald had died.

There have been other attempts to rewrite the words to this stirring hymn set to part of the Planet suite, namely Jupiter by Gustav Holst. Indeed Holst adapted the words to fit his newly written work and named it Thaxton, the village name where he had composed the piece.

One Labour MP rewrote words to the hymn in the hope that he would reclaim the melody from what he described as blind patriotism. His words were:

We vow to build a country
where all can live in health,
Where no child need live in poverty,
where we will share our wealth;
Where we fulfil the true potential
of each and every one

We vow to build a country
where none of us take heed
Of birth or disability,
of race or sex or creed.
By the strength of our endeavour
we can build the world anew,

And we achieve more together
than we achieve alone.
As democrats and socialists
we hold this to be true:
From each by their ability,
to everyone their due.

And put the power in the hands
of the many not the few.
For there is a simple principle
that no one shall displace:
We are all alike in humankind,
we are the human race.

Some of the sentiments especially concerning respect for all humanity and the wellbeing of all people are perhaps good ideals. However the hymn rewrite still seems to promote the wrong messages. Nowhere in the hymn is God explicitly mentioned, however the hymn in whichever format always reflected the thoughts about our life in our country in the first verse and thought's about heaven in the second verse.

The pictures of that first VE Day celebration certainly reflect pictures of joy and peace. It's noted that even the young Princesses joined in the throngs crowding the streets.

Hopefully we will have peaceful joyful celebrations on Thursday, but one can't help but wonder if there might have to be more control to avoid the excesses that so often lead today to violence and crime?

I do keep coming back to the thought that God is not explicitly mentioned in the hymn that will end the day or in our celebration's. One hopes that undergirding the whole commemoration will be prayers and thanksgiving to God. Or am I being too legalistic?



In today's reading from the book of Acts there is the notable conversion of Saul. A man who was so deeply devoted to what he believed to be the Law of God that he wasn't adverse to using violent means. He used his interpretation of the the law to kill and torture those he didn't believe fitted into his view of God's law. He seemed out of his mind, and unwilling to consider any other position but his. We have seen examples of this kind of religious fervour all too often. In terror attacks. Perhaps not such evil thoughts and actions, but certainly some unchristian behaviour even in our own churches when we have not been unanimous on church decisions. Both historically and in our own times. I was once told that to get a hundred percent attendance at a church council, suggest that your thinking of doing away with the pews!

We first encounter Saul in Acts chapter 7. The religious leaders had dragged Stephen into the street and bludgeoned him to death with stones. Saul stood by and approved of the murder. Who is this supposed Godly person, that could not only witness but endorse such brutality? There are three important things to know about him. First, he was a Jewish man, born in a Greek town called Tarsus, far away from Jerusalem. Second, he was a Roman Citizen. This was very rare for a Jewish man. Third, he chose to move to Jerusalem and train as a Pharisee. He was a devout Pharisee and teacher of the Law of Moses. He loved his country and was violently opposed to anyone whom he considered to be a blasphemer. He actually blamed the Law breakers as the reason why God had not delivered them from the Roman Empire. He judged them to be the cause of God not intervening as he thought God should have done.

We possibly remember the words of Jesus about judging others? Matthew 7, “do not judge, or you too will be judged.” Or Luke 6, we remember Jesus’ words about dealing with the speck in someone else’s eyes when you haven’t dealt with the log in your own eyes.

The picture in Acts is a kind of reverse picture of what we have just thought about. The first VE Day, Joyful peaceful and rejoicing. VE Day 80 are the memories fading or the essence of the message of the day being forgotten and becoming distant and dimmed? Acts, darkness to blinding light, VE Day light hearts and 80 years on ?

In Acts the picture of Saul’s way of law keeping in the name of religion is very dark indeed. However the picture moves from darkness to light, a blinding light!

Have you ever had that light bulb moment, a moment when in a flash you have seen the light and turned full circle in your actions and thoughts? The feelings can be a mixture of joy and sadness. Joy at seeing a better way and sadness and recrimination at the foolishness of the way you have been going.

We thought a little about Saul’s background but I also don’t think he would have been a very happy person. I don’t think he would’ve been the sort of person to enjoy being in his company. Certainly a person in a very dark place. One of the hymn writer Cecil Spring’s friends was Edward Grey. Grey became a prominent Liberal politician and a key figure in shaping the country’s foreign policy. It was he who famously commented on the outbreak of World War I that the lamps of Europe were all going out. A dark time and place. Have you ever been in a dark place? I mean a really dark uncomfortable place. I remember visiting a slate mine on a family holiday. Everything was fine until for some reason I wandered just slightly away from the guide and his light. I never knew darkness could be so intense until that moment. It was so thick I felt like I had lost everything. It was smothering. I was truly blind and lost. My Father reached out for me and he was embarrassingly close because as I turned to his voice he poked me accidentally in the eye, while trying to reach out for me, ouch!

Despite a sore eye, once we emerged from the darkness the outside and sunlight never felt so good,. I invite you to think about an experience when you were walking in a dark uncomfortable place. Maybe it was in an underground environment, like my story. Maybe you are walking in the woods and the tree canopy is so thick that it is almost dark as night. Perhaps you are working inside. Now, imagine yourself walking from that dark place and suddenly stepping outside, into the full light of day. You accidentally look up and straight into the sun. How does that feel?

It’s painful isn’t it. And shocking. It might even knock you down it’s so bright. Isn’t it interesting how shocking a sudden exposure to bright light can be. In that moment between darkness and light, the light can even blind us and disorient us. It is disruptive.

In our story today, we heard how Saul had a moment like that. The event turned his life upside down and even his name changed from Saul to Paul. Soon to be the disciple the churches revered. A friend and guide to the churches whose letters were received by him and are still so important in our Christian understanding and faith today.

VE Day is important to commemorate with light. We recall how we came from a very dark place into a place of light and life. The disruption of that first VE Day was as important as the disruption of today’s commemoration’s. The chance to stop and reflect and to remember that, as Cecil Spring wrote, “there’s another country I’ve heard of long ago, And her ways are ways of gentleness, and all her paths are peace”. We need to make vows to be personal lights for peace, the peace that God calls us to reflect. A peace that respects all people, those who we are comfortable with and especially those who disturb our comfort zones. Do you remember the childhood chorus, “This little light of mine I’m going to let it shine Let it shine, all the time, let it shine.” As we commemorate the 80th VE Day let us in our hearts and prayers light, lights of peace. Peace that permeates our world and turns it upside down so that we see an end to war, rage, inhumanity and all that threatens the way that God wants us to live .

A few questions for us to ponder as we prepare for the VE Day celebrations: What are the shadows in which we hide. What are the reasons that cause us to see a person who is different than us and live in fear and hatred? What are the thoughts we harbour in our hearts that are against everything that our faith and indeed against all we revere on VE Day?

The Risen Christ shines the bright light of truth into each of our lives today. The light drives away the shadows and exposes the truth that all people are children of God. The Good News is for all people. The Good News disrupts our systems that divide and judge and calls us into the scary and difficult work of reaching out across the boundaries and seeking reconciliation and ways to say, “Brother, Sister, in Christ, we are one.”

STF 696

For the healing of the nations,
Lord, we pray with one accord;
for a just and equal sharing
of the things that earth affords.
To a life of love in action
help us rise and pledge our word.

Lead us forward into freedom;
from despair your world release,
that, redeemed from war and hatred,
all may come and go in peace.
Show us how through care and goodness
fear will die and hope increase.

All that kills abundant living,
let it from the earth be banned;
pride of status, race, or schooling,
dogmas that obscure your plan.
In our common quest for justice
may we hallow life's brief span.

You, Creator-God, have written
your great name on humankind;
for our growing in your likeness
bring the life of Christ to mind;
that by our response and service
earth its destiny may find.

Prayers of Intercession (based on prayers written by The Bible Reading Fellowship for VE DAY)

God of peace,
who raised Christ Jesus to victory over death, keep us ever mindful of the cost of making peace, of the call to be peacemakers, and of the carefulness needed to keep the peace, in our lives, in our land and in our world.

God of light,
who helped to keep the home fires burning during the dark days of war in Europe, set our lives alight today in a time of peace, so that we shine as lamplights, keeping the darkness at bay and holding onto that precious peace that was won for us in history, and supremely on the cross for eternity. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God of sadness and celebration,
you share our pain at loss as well as our joy in reunion. We remember with gratitude the mixed emotions of VE Day, in people's hearts, and on the streets. Comfort those who still grieve, and challenge us who live on to value what was won and to build on the legacy of lives sacrificed.

God of the nations
and of this nation, thank you for bringing us through the hardships of the Second World War. On this eightieth anniversary may the red in our flag remind us of the sacrifices made; may the blue in our flag, remind us of the freedoms we now enjoy; And may the white in our flag remind us of the dove of peace which we must never take for granted.

God of all nations
We pray for countries that are in the news today especially because of their suffering. We pray that an end to all wars will come. That violence and hatred will cease. That a respect for all people will be the chief thought in the hearts and minds of everyone.

God of compassion
We pray for those who are suffering today, we remember those known personally to us and those who have been brought to our attention. Be very close to all those in need today.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayers. **Amen**

STF 470

Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided,
urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided,
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.

Lord, for that word, the Word of life which fires us,
speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,
teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us,
Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.

Lord, for our land, in this our generation,
spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care;
for young and old, for commonwealth and nation,

Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayers.

Lord, for our world; when we disown and doubt
him,
loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain;
hungry and helpless, lost indeed without him,
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.

Lord, for ourselves; in living power remake us,
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne;
past put behind us, for the future take us,
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

The Blessing

Send us out to be beacons of peace, in a dark world of conflict
Make us instruments of peace for whoever we meet and
wherever we go,
In the name of the Prince of Peace, Our Lord and saviour, Jesus
Christ. **Amen.**

