**24th May 2020**

[Call to worship](javascript:void(0))

Glory to God in the highest..  
Glory to God the Father.  
Glory to Jesus the Son..  
Glory to the Holy Spirit.  


[A gathering prayer](javascript:void(0))

Mighty God, we gather in humility to worship you.  
Caring God, we bring to you our concerns.  
Glorious God, we exalt your holy name.  
Unite us – make us one in you,  
that your love may strengthen and empower us.  
Amen.



**HYMN: Hail the day that sees him rise**

Hail the day that sees him rise, Alleluia!  
taken from our wondering eyes; Alleluia!  
Christ, awhile to mortals given, Alleluia!  
enters now the highest heaven! Alleluia!

There the glorious triumph waits; Alleluia!  
lift your heads, eternal gates! Alleluia!  
Christ hath conquered death and sin; Alleluia!  
take the King of glory in! Alleluia!

Lo! the heaven its Lord receives, Alleluia!  
yet he loves the earth he leaves; Alleluia!  
though returning to his throne, Alleluia!  
still he calls mankind his own. Alleluia!

See! he lifts his hands above; Alleluia!  
See! he shows the prints of love: Alleluia!  
Hark! his gracious lips bestow, Alleluia!  
blessings on his Church below. Alleluia!

Still for us he intercedes, Alleluia!  
his prevailing death he pleads, Alleluia!  
near himself prepares our place, Alleluia!  
he the first fruits of our race. Alleluia!

There we shall with thee remain, Alleluia!  
partners of thy eternal reign, Alleluia!  
there thy face forever see, Alleluia!  
find our heaven of heavens in thee, Alleluia!

Top of Form

[A prayer of approach](javascript:void(0))

Lord of all glory, we come before you  
seeking your wisdom,  
that we may glorify you through our thinking;  
seeking your love,  
that we may glorify you through our emotions;  
seeking your strength,  
that we may glorify you at all times;  
seeking your perseverance,  
that we may glorify you in all places.  
Show us how to live,  
that our lives shine with your glory,  
and those who encounter us may know you  
and that you are at work in your world.  
Amen.



[A prayer of confession](javascript:void(0))

When our actions are not loving,  
and we think of just ourselves –  
your name is not glorified.  
Forgive us, God of Glory.  
  
When our words bring hurt to others  
and we do not even notice –  
your name is not glorified.  
Forgive us, God of Glory.  
  
When the way we live is selfish  
and we find no time for you –  
your name is not glorified.  
Forgive us, God of Glory.  
  
When we do not see you or reveal your love –  
your name is not glorified.  
Forgive us, God of Glory.  
  
Forgive and renew us,  
and let your glory be seen in our lives.  
Amen.



[A prayer of adoration](javascript:void(0))

God of majesty and might,  
your glory shines throughout the universe:  
from the highest heaven to the deepest sea;  
in all the creatures you have made;  
in the seasons that shape our living.  
Your glory shines through who you are  
and through what you do.  
The power of your glory  
touches your creation and exalts it.  
To you we offer our worship;  
to you we offer our praise;  
before you we come in adoration.  
Amen.

**Lord’s Prayer**



**John 17:1-11; Acts 1.6-14**

### On Thursday the church celebrated the Ascension of Jesus: the return of the Risen Christ to heaven.

### I saw a cartoon this week that had the feet of Jesus disappearing in the cloud and the caption said ‘Ascension was the day that Jesus decided to work from home.’

### Those working from home during this lockdown I’m sure would appreciate the joke. You may not have the tiring commute, but you can feel a bit out of it, disconnected and unable to influence things at first hand. You also may get intrusions into your workspace, especially if there are small people in the house.

### Perhaps those of you who are on furlough can relate to this - you are handing over your work, you still are involved, but you will be distant for a while.

### The disciples who witnessed the ascension are asking Jesus ‘when will the kingdom come… what’s the plan? Jesus just tells them to wait for the Spirit and then they will be his witnesses: not much of a exit strategy you could argue’

### It is also difficult to plan at the moment – what is going to happen next – so many uncertainties at the moment. Will the schools go back, or won’t they? Is it safe or not? Can you use public transport? Should you use public transport? Will the funding for furloughed workers continue until there is a vaccine? What about those who are self-employed? What about summer holidays?

### Then the big question: will the football ever restart, and the league be completed? I know many Man United fans who just want the league declared null and void. Funny that, what with Liverpool having a 25-point lead with only nine games left? Lockdown and our attitudes towards it will all depend on our own context and circumstances.

### Our two readings this morning are about Jesus leaving this earthly life and what the plans are for what happens next. There is tension and there is drama but the ones left behind are urged to carry on the show.

### John’s gospel doesn’t have an account of the ascension of Jesus to heaven. Instead, John has a number of stories of the Risen Jesus meeting with his disciples and commissioning them for mission and action in his name. There is no disappearing in the clouds. You have hints of it in the long prayer of Jesus in chapter 17.

### Jesus having done all his Father has asked him to do now asks that he may be exalted, glorified, lifted up to that position alongside the Father which in Jewish tradition the king, the Messiah, the son of man, was supposed to attain. The Messiah, say the psalms, will rule a kingdom that stretches from shore to shore, to the ends of the earth (Psalm 72.8). In other words, he will have a universal dominion.

### When the Messiah leaves this earth and takes up his seat, exalted over all the world, then the age to come will truly have arrived. It would be a time of new life, life with new quality (not just quantity, going on and on for ever). It would be, in our inadequate phrase, ‘eternal life’. Not just something we can have when we die – something for later. This life has come to birth in the world in and through Jesus.

### One of the great themes of John’s gospel is that the relationship between Jesus and the Father, the intimacy, the love, is something that we are invited to start to share in now. Jesus may have left us (to work from home) but he’s left us his Spirit to mysteriously unite us together in the embrace and communion between each other and God – the God known to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### This mysterious relationship is part of prayer. In the John passage we have Jesus in prayer. We know that Jesus prayed, but we have few accounts of what he actually prayed. John has this account of Jesus’ final farewell prayer on the evening before he would go to his death. In this prayer we are invited to come into the heart of that intimate relationship between Jesus and the Father

Many scholars call it Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. Jesus knows he is about to leave his disciples alone in the world and he goes before God as a priest would, to intercede for them, to pray for them.

**You have to wonder what would Jesus pray for us today, in our present situation?**

In verse 9 onwards Jesus prays:

*I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.****10****All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them.****11****I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+17&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-26771b)*] your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.*

Jesus is leaving the building. He is going to be working from home! He entrusts his disciples to the Father he has known and loved, the Father who, he knows, will care for them every bit as much as he has done for himself. He is very much aware that the disciples are at risk. The world, which hates them as much as it hated him, will threaten and abuse them. They don’t belong to it, but they are to be sent into it, and they need protecting. That’s what the prayer is about.

Jesus prayer began by describing his followers as ones who the Father had given him out of the world and now Jesus is handing them back into God’s safe keeping. The term ‘the world’ in John’s gospel means the world in so far as it has rebelled against God, has chosen darkness rather light, and has organized itself to oppose its creator. Seen from within that ‘world’, Jesus is ‘from’ elsewhere. In other words, ‘the world’ in this dark sense is not the place, the force, the sphere, that determines who the disciples most truly are. What they now need therefore is to be kept from being pulled back into ‘the world’ with all its wickedness and rebellion. During his public ministry Jesus has looked after them. Now he entrusts them to the Father. He is asking God to preserve his people from evil, from the tricks and traps of ‘the world’.

Christianity often gets stereotyped with being repressed, overly concerned at emotions and passions at war within us. The church, and those in it, has a common image of being prudish killjoys. Perhaps we do need to reflect on whether our faith leads us into joy and the fullness of life that Jesus promised in this chapter.

But our faith is realistic about the world. We well know that this world is a dangerous place and temptation lurks at every corner to lead us into destruction – behaviour, talk, actions that can bring us down and others with us and damage our relationship with God. Our emotions and passions are volatile things – which is why Paul, for example in his letter to the Galatians, urges us to be under the control of the Holy Spirit and not just give in to our base humanity.

Jesus prays that God will do all God can do to ensure we are protected.

You have to wonder what Jesus would pray for us today, in our present situation?

Bear in mind that John wrote this gospel after most of the apostles had died martyrs’ deaths witnessing to Christ. They were not immune from bodily harm – yet in another sense had remained true to their faith. Not a week goes by without me knowing of Christians who suffer physically, mentally, and spiritually.

In a scene from Shadowlands, a film based on the life of C.S. Lewis, Lewis has returned to Oxford from London, where he has just been married to Joy Gresham, an American woman, in a private Anglican ceremony performed at her hospital bedside. She is dying from cancer, and, through the struggle with her illness, she and Lewis have been discovering the depth of their love for each other.

As Lewis arrives at the college where he teaches, he is met by Harry Harrington, an Anglican priest, who asks what news there is. Lewis hesitates; then, deciding to speak of the marriage and not the cancer, he says, "Ah, good news, I think, Harry. Yes, good news."  
  
Harrington, not aware of the marriage and thinking that Lewis is referring to Joy's medical situation, replies, "I know how hard you've been praying.... Now, God is answering your prayer."

"That's not why I pray, Harry," Lewis responds. "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God; it changes me."

In recent years there is an ecumenical prayer initiative ‘Thy Kingdom Come’[[1]](#endnote-1) in the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost. We will be holding a day of prayer on Saturday to pray for ourselves, the church, the nation, the world: see the Tab church emails and website for more details of how to be part of that.

Each day Thy Kingdom Come sends out an email with videos you can watch. The other day, when the theme was Thanks one of those interviewed was Dr Rajesh Kochupapy a consultant colorectal and paediatric surgeon[[2]](#endnote-2). He said his day can be very varied and looking in the human body anything could go wrong, but he starts the day in prayer. He goes to the hospital chapel so every problem he gives to the Lord.

He says: ‘*And He helps me and gives me guidance. You hear the small gentle voice in your ears which will say don’t turn left or right but go straight and that voice keeps me going every day. Prayer is a two-way communication to the Lord. If you love somebody you speak to him first and then you start the day. So it’s a two way communication between me and my Father and that goes on every minute from the time I start to the end. And I know that He is seeing me everywhere I walk even to the heavens or the earth or all the working place and I need His guidance so prayer is important for me.*

C.S. Lewis wrote that ‘The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists in shoving it all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.  
  
  
Jesus prays that we will know the Father and to know him, the Son – this is eternal life – a life that is everlasting, secure on firm foundations whatever else life may throw at you. And Jesus promises in the chapters around this one in John 17 and in Acts chapter one that although he is leaving the building he will leave us his Spirit – to give us the power to be his witnesses – more about that next week.

The final thing Jesus prays for his disciples is that the Father will protect them by the power of your name, the name you have given me, that they may be one, as we are one.

Jesus is talking about you and me. We all follow in the name of Christ. United.

Unity is not just a formal arrangement – it isn’t just an outward thing. It is based here in this prayer on the unity between Father and the Son. The point is expressed later in verse 23 – may they be one that the world may believe. It is a powerful witness when a church, made up of different races, customs, gender, age, class, can come together in the name of Christ. It doesn’t happen in the world. It is a precious thing.

Yet as in any human relationship unity cannot be forced. There can be no bullying, no manipulation. Yet as in any human relationships there are going to be differences of opinion, particularly when a church is so diverse in background and personalities. It’s a real struggle to still feel as though you’re one with the rest of your congregation. We all need to hear Jesus praying for us.

'The UK Blessing' video which we used at the end of our Christian Aid service a few weeks ago, had [one million views within 48 hours of being released](https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/watch-the-worship-music-video-everyone-is-talking-about).[[3]](#endnote-3)

'The Blessing' is from the Aaronic blessing in the time of Moses as recorded in the book of Numbers.

There were over 65 churches involved, and they represent hundreds more. But they all came together to sing this over the UK - that God wants to bless people and God is for us not against us.

Tim Hughes a church leader from Birmingham was instrumental in putting it together and I heard him interviewed about it. He said:

*Loads of people have been getting in touch saying, 'when I watch this, I just find myself weeping.'*

*I think the spirit of God is on it. There's a sense of unity and diversity - we've got the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, Pentecostal, Church of England...so I guess I feel God's going to do what he wants to do with it.*

*I love the fact that no one owns it. When you watch the video you don't necessarily know who the people are, but you just catch the spirit of 'this is the Church delighting in God and delighting in these words of blessing over the UK.'*

*I think there's something deep within us that wants to feel united. In Psalm 133, God commands a blessing when brothers and sisters live in harmony and I think these songs are moments where you realize, we have all these petty disagreements over silly things, but the bottom line is, God loves us. And God loves the world and we want to be people who put the megaphone out and say, 'God loves you!'.*

He was asked ‘**When this is over, will church go back to normal?’**

Tim Hughes said: ‘*I think the great tragedy would be if we all just carried on doing exactly the same things and said, 'well, that was a weird year or 18 months'.*

*I think what we are seeing is God empowering local households to take responsibility for their faith. Church isn't where we go to a building or an event, but instead we're learning to take responsibility for our own faith and our families. And also, to think about our communities*

*We can't be consumers. If we can get hold of that, we're going to see the Church awakened in this nation like never before, with much less emphasis on the great preacher, the great worship leader or the great church, but actually much more on households and the individuals getting right before God, praying for God's kingdom to come and just loving people around them.*

*Whenever something of this scale happens globally, you have to believe God is going to work in and through it. I don't believe God has sent this virus. But I believe God can use it to really speak into people's lives and we're seeing that there's a hunger and an openness when suddenly everything that you thought so secure - your personal freedom, finance - is all stripped away. You have to ask the big questions. What is this all about? So I think we have a massive opportunity. I always believe God is about to do something remarkable.*

*We don't want to get carried away. I'm always wary when people are predicting dates and saying we're going to see this in the next year or 18 months. But I want to pray that God is going to do something remarkable. I want to live like that. And I want to serve, fully anticipating God's doing something special in our country.’*

When in Acts, Jesus leaves the building – is ascended to heaven - the disciples left are told to wait for power from the Holy Sprit to empower them in their witness. The parallel emphasis on prayer (Acts 1.14) – implying devotion to God and openness to God's Spirit – and action – being witnesses throughout the world – epitomises Jesus' approach of handing on responsibility.

'You will be my witnesses…' (Acts 1.8) is not much of a detailed job description – frustrating in lack of detail – exit strategy you could say… but it is the command that enables Christians everywhere to adapt their witness to their own life context. It allows each of us to work out through prayer and an openness to the Holy Spirit, what 'witness' means in the world as we find it to be.

May God protect us and keep us one, as we seek that life by which we know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent and live and witness in the power of the Spirit.

[Prayers of intercession](javascript:void(0))

**1 Peter 5.7 says:  
Cast all your anxiety on him, the scripture says, because he cares for you.**We bring before God our concerns for our world:  
where there is war we pray for peace;  
where there is sickness we pray for health;  
where there is despair we pray for hope.  
Cast all your anxiety on him,   
because he cares for you.  
  
We pray that you would be active in health care:  
in the work of doctors and dentists, psychiatrists and psychologists, nurses and administrators, pharmacists and researchers.  
Cast all your anxiety on him,  
because he cares for you.  
  
Guide our activity in the church:  
may we find ways to grow;  
may we always honour you;  
may we serve our communities.  
Cast all your anxiety on him,  
because he cares for you.  
  
We hold in your love those whom we love:  
those who are sick;  
those who are sorrowful;  
those who need guidance and direction.  
Cast all your anxiety on him,  
because he cares for you.  
  
Come to us, God of glory.  
Hear us, heal us and shine through our lives.  
Cast all your anxiety on him,  
because he cares for you.  
Amen.



**HYMN: Crown him with many crowns**

1 Crown him with many crowns,  
the Lamb upon his throne,  
while heaven's eternal anthem drowns  
all music but its own!  
Awake, my soul, and sing  
of him who died to be  
your saviour and your matchless king  
through all eternity.

2 Crown him the Lord of life  
triumphant from the grave,  
who rose victorious from the strife  
for those he came to save:  
his glories now we sing  
who died and reigns on high;  
he died eternal life to bring  
and lives that death may die.

3 Crown him the Lord of love,  
who shows his hands and side  
those wounds yet visible above  
in beauty glorified.  
No angel in the sky  
can fully bear that sight,  
but downward bends his burning eye  
at mysteries so bright.

4 Crown him the Lord of years,  
the potentate of time,  
creator of the rolling spheres  
in majesty sublime:  
all hail, Redeemer, hail,  
for you have died for me;  
your praise shall never, never fail  
through all eternity!

[A prayer for all ages together](javascript:void(0))

Practice a clapping rhythm to accompany the word ‘glory’, emphasising each syllable.  
  
God is good in all creation: glory, glory, glory.  
God is love in all the world: glory, glory, glory.  
God is seen when we are loving: glory, glory, glory.  
God will give us life eternal: glory, glory, glory.



[A sending out prayer](javascript:void(0))

May the Lord protect us

May the Lord keep us as one

May the Lord empower us to be witnesses to God’s kingdom

May the blessing of God be with us always

Amen

1. <https://www.thykingdomcome.global/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teUmfrezqag&feature=youtu.be> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/The-UK-Blessing-Tim-Hughes-on-when-worship-goes-viral> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)