**9th January 2022**

**Call to worship**

Beloved of God, come, turn to Christ.
When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan
and the Holy Spirit descended upon him,
he knew he was beloved by God.
Let us know the warmth of God’s love today.



**A gathering prayer**

Loving God, we come to worship.
You have called each of us by name, we belong to you.
Pour out your Spirit on us, we pray,
that we may know your love and our belovedness today.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

God of creation, the wilderness belongs to you,
and it is there you often call us to find you.
From the wastelands of our lives,
we seek you as did those who sought John by the Jordan.
We bow our heads for cleansing and renewal,
joyfully submitting anew to the baptism of belonging to you.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

Lord, you enfold us before we know it.
You know us by name long before we hear your call.
We belonged to you from the first;
the welcome was always waiting.
In astonished joy, we realise that we are beloved,
and we turn from our ways to yours.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

The last two years have wrecked and reconfigured our lives in many ways.
As we emerge, we confess we feel lost.
An arid wilderness lies before us,
bereft of certainties we thought secure,
and we must search for spiritual succour to help us journey through this wasteland.
But we are exhausted, Lord, and our heads droop.
Our faith is faltering and we want short cuts, quick results, instant gratification.
Forgive us, Lord, for seeking renewal in the wrong places.
We raise our faces to you, O Lord, for in you we belong and are known and loved,
even when we no longer know who we really are.
Call us by name.
Renew us that we may play our part in restoring the world.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord, your forgiveness comes like cooling rain,
streams in the desert of our wild, disorientated wanderings,
calming our woes, washing our regrets into the sands
that will shockingly and surprisingly bloom
with new life, when we thought all the good seeds
within us had dried to barren husks.
From your forgiveness comes renewal,
and the strength to rise again like a phoenix
from the ashes of our wastelands,
wallowing in despair no more,
ready and able to move on – with you.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Lord God, we thank you for the wild man of the wilderness
who calls us to immerse ourselves in transforming water.
In John of the Jordan, we see the raw need of our own nature,
and in his baptism is the turning of the tide as we return to you.
And we praise you for the carpenter-cum-preacher
who knelt before him, wholly human, holy human;
for Jesus, who submitted to the welcome of baptismal water
in fellowship with us, that all might be blessed, and all might
belong, known and named in the family of your followers.
**Amen.**



**Luke 3.15-17,21-22**

At the turn of the New Year most people will spare a thought for what may lie ahead – what this New Year may bring. There may be many uncertainties: when will we ever get over covid? The future may be full of fears and foreboding. You may be positive about what lies ahead, eager to make the most of new opportunities. You may be concerned about your children – how will they grow up, what influences , good or bad will they be exposed to this year? You will be concerned for your own well being and security, your job, your housing, your relationships. You wouldn’t be human if you didn’t worry about these things. What vision will guide you? What will sustain you in this coming year. Where role does faith play in your life.

Many are looking for a rescuer, to rescue them and give them a chance of a better life.

*Jenny Cheung writes[[1]](#endnote-1)* It’s a movie plot we’ve seen a thousand times: girl, down on her luck is introduced to man with fabulous wealth and (with a few sacrifices, costs and bumps along the way) they fall in love and live happily ever after… And we love it. We eat it up. Of course we do, or they wouldn’t keep making movies and TV shows with the same old tired plot. We’re all looking to be introduced to someone who will rescue us.

Perhaps this is the lie that countless girls and young women bought into when they were recruited by Ghislaine Maxwell to become part of Jeffrey Epstein’s “circle”. Women and girls who were kept in luxurious apartments, taken to paradise islands and raped repeatedly.

Sarah Ransome, a survivor of Maxwell & Epstein’s abuse, [has spoken widely in the media this week](https://uk.news.yahoo.com/jeffrey-epstein-survivor-sarah-ransome-170000611.html) during and following the trial and conviction of Ghislaine Maxwell. She says: “When I was deliberately targeted by the young woman that recruited me, I had no one in New York and I was a 22-year-old, I was a baby. I had just come from an abusive relationship, really abusive, and she befriended me, and that completely let my guard down. You know, I had been told, Jeffrey was such a wonderful kind man and he really loves helping young struggling talented people.” Sarah needed to be rescued and she had no idea that she would soon need rescuing from her ‘rescuers’.

In this week’s passage, we see a very different sort of introduction – John the Baptist introducing Jesus as the Messiah and then God the Father confirming the introduction as Jesus is baptised in the Jordan and God speaks words of love and affirmation over Him. Jesus, the rescuer has arrived.

Jesus doesn’t rescue us with wealth, fancy apartments, fabulous holiday destinations or couture fashion – in fact, we may find ourselves struggling as we follow Him. Jesus rescues us with something that can never be taken away and never used for abusive ends: unconditional love.

How can we begin to embody a sense of being loved? How can we help the young people we walk alongside to recognise where they are looking for a rescuer and point them into the safe arms of Jesus?

It is one of the tenets of faith that behind all things is Someone. There is a Creator. In the mystery of creation and evolution is the mysterious Other – we are more than the sum of our parts – there is more to life than this – to quote the Alpha Course catchphrase.

I heard about a little girl who was sitting on her grandfather’s lap as he read her a bedtime story. From time to time, she would take her eyes off the book and reach up to touch his wrinkled cheek. She was alternately stroking her own cheek, then his again. Finally she spoke up, "Grandpa, did God make you?"

 "Yes, Sweetheart," he answered, "God made me a long time ago."

 "Oh," she paused, "Grandpa, did God make me too?"

 "Yes, indeed, honey," he said, "God made you just a little while ago."

Feeling their respective faces again, she observed, "God’s getting better at it, isn’t he?"

Since the beginning God has attempted to get people’s attention and to call them into a commitment to live with principles, values, and sense of sacredness that God wants from all humanity. Sometimes the people heard and responded to God, and sometimes they ignored God.

We have just celebrated Christmas were Christians believe that God took on human form, walking among us and living with us so that we would understand.

It is in the living, breathing person of Jesus that we believe we really see all things we call holy, such as forgiveness, sharing, joy, vision, courage, perseverance, and especially love. We might think we understand love, for example, but when we receive totally unconditional love from another person, love takes on a completely new meaning for us. When we experience being a parent, love takes on a new meaning also.

Jesus shows us the ultimate example of love, namely, God’s love. Seeing this example in the flesh makes all the difference in the world for us. Before Jesus did anything, before he started his minstry6, before he preached and healed and set people free, before he went to a cross and died and before he was raised from the dead, he heard these words at his baptism:

*When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened****22****and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “**You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”*

*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased*

It is a wonderful thing to know you are loved. To know you are a child of god and loved by god is the key initial experience fo a life of faith.

I was deeply moved by the testimonies we had at our carol service. Obviously because of Covid, attendance was down by around two thirds at our Christmas services but at least they were recorded and you can watch them all again on our Facebook page. The Carol service featured a number of our members sharing the lessons they had learnt in the last year facing the pandemic while working in a hospital, as a care worker, facing a serious illness , being bereaved and also finding faith.

Michael’s testimony was about how he as an analytical cynical and questioning journalist – (his description not mine!) came to ask Jesus to save him, to be his rescuer. He had previously in his life cried out to God for help: when a relationship had ended, when his first son was born and wasn’t breathing – but both times he dismissed those prayers as psychosomatic – its what you do in a crisis. But last summer he cried out at a low point in his life for God to help him and this time he meant it. In his testimony - and if you didn’t watch it please do watch it – he said it felt as if Jesus had dived into the water as he was drowning and had pulled him to shore. A great feeling of being loved – unconditionally – whatever he’d done in the past , was in the past, now was the chance of a new start. That sense of being loved he described as when you’re a child you have a nightmare and you go and get into bed with your parents and you feel the warmth and embrace.

Having faith is no guarantee of happiness and prosperity. Being baptized is no good luck charm, as though no disasters will befall you. Listen to some of the other testimonies in that carol service from Allan and Kathryn. Look what happened to Jesus. But he knew he was loved and accepted which gave him the secure foundation to love and give himself for the world.

Faith in God can help us in our times of trouble as well as in our times of joy. I remember visiting someone in hospital. He was in great pain, enough to make him resort to swearing, even in the presence of a minister!” at least you know there being honest. ‘I’m a poor sod’ he said, wincing through the pain. But then he grasped my hand, looked me in the eye and with a smile said ‘I’m also a rich sod too. I’m rich in faith. I know I’m being held and sustained by God and every kindness given to me, every shaft of light that flickers in this darkness, reassures me that God is there.’

The mountaineer on the Alpha Course publicity is Bear Grylls, an ex SAS soldier and now ultimate survival expert and TV Personality. In an interview in the Alpha newspaper he said:

*‘it took me a long time to find out that real faith isn’t becoming weird or about giving up on fun – it was finding out that I was held, forgiven and loved regardless.*

*Church should be more like a hospital, where we are all a bit damaged and muddling our way through together. It’s OK to be a bit dirty and bloody, not all perfect and healed.*

*Christianity is about discovering that in the business and struggles of life we are not alone and that this Jesus is actually beside us. Faith is that backbone that we all need in our lives.’*

He and his wife Shara married in 2000 and did an Alpha Course soon afterwards. We are about to start a new alpha Course in a couple of weeks time, on Wednesday 19th Jan at 7.30pm. Please consider doing what Bear Grylls did: invite his partner along or it could be a friend – ‘this is important to me would you come and consider it for yourself, or at least to understand me and my faith better.

Bear Grylls said the alpha Course was pivotal to their life as a family. He said ;

*‘Our faith has been a real rock to us a couple so many times when things have been hard.*

*Both Shara and I lost our Dads within a a few months of each other when we were first married – my faith, despite it being at times pretty weak, has helped us struggle through all the pain and anger of that loss.*

*It’s still in many ways very raw, but my Dad died with a steadfast hope that heaven and Jesus are real. I want to live that way too.*

*Also, having Jesse my son, has restored so much of my faith. To kneel beside his little bed, and watch him hold his hands together with his eyes shut, and say his prayers together is like heaven to me.*

*It is the most natural thing in the world and I feel a presence of God that I have only ever felt a few times before.’*

 In the gospel passage John talks about Jesus who will come and *baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing shovel is ready in his hand, to clear the threshing floor, gather the wheat and burn the chaff.* It may conjure up terrifying images of judgment but elsewhere Jesus describes the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives as guiding us into all truth, leading us into true freedom. The image of discarding the chaff, the useless bit of the harvest, is an image that could apply to how we are led to burn up the stuff that is useless in our lives, the habits, the thinking, the way we spend our time and money on stuff that is not doing us any good. As you grow in faith your priorities and perspective on life will change. To be baptized is to start that process of immersion in a new reality, the reality of being in Christ, and living in faith.

As we start a new year together in this church – we need to renew our vision of God. To know, to feel, to experience again that we are loved and called by God: *You are my child, whom I love.*

The family of God, the church, has been battered by this pandemic. There has been good things and there have been bad things that have happened to us in the last two years. We need to rebuild the church. Better, we hope and pray. The bonds of belonging have been frayed, with the lack of meeting together and the lockdowns and home isolation. The challenge will be to find ways of belonging in this new year because that is the best way to grow spiritually by being committed to part of the body – where you pray together, study together, worship together, laugh together and serve together and are reminded, again and again by God:

You are my child whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

**Prayers of intercession**

Loving Lord of earth and heaven,
we thank you for the love which you have shown us through your wonderful creation.
We pray for those who work to combat climate change;
for scientists researching new ways to fuel our needs;
for politicians to respond to the situation and to keep the pledges they have made;
for us that we may seek ways to live that help preserve the wonderful world that you have made’

As we celebrate your love for us,
**May we love you in return.**

Loving God of continents and countries,
we thank you for the love you have shown us which gives us a sense of identity.
We pray for those who live in fear of war and civil strife;
for those who are threatened by oppression and violence;
for those who are driven to seek refuge and asylum in other nations or states;
for us that we may value our common humanity and share your love with others.

As we celebrate your love for us,
**May we love you in return.**

Loving God of wholeness and health,
we thank you for your love shown to us through the care of healthcare workers and the National Health Service.
We pray for those suffering from stress as a result of the covid pandemic;
for hospitals having to declare critical incidents;
for those suffering with long Covid;
For us that we may through the way we live keep ourselves and others safe.

As we celebrate your love for us,
**May we love you in return.**

Loving God of cathedral, church and chapel,
we thank you for the places where we gather to worship you.
We pray for those with responsibilities for their upkeep;
for those who are engaged in food banks and work with refugees and asylum seekers;
for those who provide space and refreshment for people to gather in safety and comfort and find companionship;
for us that our lives may always be those of your loving and faithful disciples.

As we celebrate your love for us,
**May we love you in return.**

Loving God of friends and family,
we thank you for those who enrich our lives by their kindness and love.
We pray for those who are separated from family and friends as a result of Covid restrictions.
for those whose homes are places of neglect or abuse;
for those who feel isolated and alone;
for us that we, knowing how much we are loved, may not be too busy to share a friendly word with others.

As we celebrate your love for us,
**May we love you in return.**

We rejoice that we are loved, and pray that refreshed by that love we may seek ways to share your empowering and refreshing love with those whom we encounter and those who do not know that they are loved.
In Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

For water that refreshes,
**we give you thanks today.**
For water that cleanses,
**we give you thanks today.**
For the water of baptism that brings forgiveness,
**we give you thanks today.**
For water that provides new life,
**we give you thanks today.**
**Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Holy Spirit, go with us into the world.
Re-source us with your power and your presence.
Father God, help us to know your love,
and that we are your beloved sons and daughters.
Lord Jesus Christ, help us to learn from you,
and to follow your example,
that we may share belovedness
with everyone we meet.
**Amen.**

1. *Jenny Cheung is a choir nut and missional pioneer (www.thevoiceprojectscotland.co.uk) and mum to three teenagers.* [*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/117-january-february-2022-c/baptism-of-the-lord/the-week-in-focus*](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/117-january-february-2022-c/baptism-of-the-lord/the-week-in-focus) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)