**29th May 2022**

Call to worship

Come to God with your longings:
our heavenly Father knows them all.
Come to God with your belongings:
our loving Saviour holds them all.
Come to God alone and together:
the Holy Spirit is here for all.



A gathering prayer

Father God, you give us so much, and yet we long for more.
Help us to open ourselves to you today, and draw us closer to you.
Help us to be open to one another, and draw us closer together.
Amen.



A prayer of approach

Let us come and worship the Lord Most High,
who guards the lives of his faithful ones.
Let us rejoice in the Lord and praise his holy name.
Amen.



A prayer of adoration

Father God, you sent your Son, Jesus Christ,
from the throne room with an invitation
to come, follow and see your glory.
We come and we glorify your name.

You are the one true God, righteous and just.
We come and we glorify your name.

God of judgement, power and joy.
We come and we glorify your name.

Bright morning star, all-inclusive God.
We come and we glorify your name.
Amen.



A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness

A prayer of confession

Your call to the very first disciples, Lord, was ‘Come, follow me.’
We follow you today, Lord.
But sometimes we can fall out of step with you.
Our longing to walk closely with you
can get hijacked by our longing to belong to the ‘in crowd’ of the moment.
And our behaviour makes us poor witnesses for you.
Lord, we are sorry; help us to live unselfishly.

At times our words may not be nice
and we’re at fault of quarrelling with one another.
Lord, we are sorry; help us to live in unity.

Sometimes fear of the consequences of speaking out
and sharing of you can silence us.
Lord, we are sorry; strengthen our faith.

Help us to make the most of every opportunity.
To be better witnesses for you
so that others will come and know the love and joy
of belonging to your family.
Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

When we belong to the Lord.
Salvation is ours.
We are washed clean.
Forgiven and free to live in joy with the Lord.
Amen.



A prayer of praise and thanksgiving for the Queeen's platinum jubilee

Loving God, we thank you for the opportunity to come together to
celebrate the life of our Queen.

For her courage, her dignity, her sincerity, WE PRAISE YOU.

For her dedication, her resilience, her faith, WE PRAISE YOU.

For all the ways she has put service before self, WE PRAISE YOU.

And we ask your blessing on her and all those she loves

at this special time, and always.

Amen.



A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

Lord, you set us free from our shackles of sin.
A freedom that is available to all who believe.
You do not discriminate but love all inclusively.

Thank you for your free gift of salvation, for washing us clean
and quenching our thirst with your living water.
Thank you for reaching out to all who thirst.
How joy bubbles up in us when we drink!
A powerful joy that can be experienced in the most wretched circumstances.
When we come and open our hearts to you,
we are welcomed into your family, belonging and loved
as much as you, the Father’s beloved Son.
Our hearts are full of love.
Thank you for blessing us and lighting up our soul.

Thank you for our longing.
Thank you for our coming to you.
Thank you for our belonging.
Our hearts leap for joy as our thanksgiving praises ring out loud:
AMEN!

**A group game**

**Exploring the significance of being ‘first’ or ‘last’.**

* Invite people to line up across the available space in birth month order – January at one end and December at the other. Ask people to notice how it feels to be where they are – especially if they are ‘first’ or ‘last’. Rearrange the line in order of birth day within the month – ‘1st’ at one end, ‘31st’ at the other. How does that feel? Repeat again with other criteria – e.g. alphabetical order by first name (many will be used to doing this by surname – does this feel different?); how many legs there are in your household (including pets); distance from home to church.
* Remind people that wherever they may be in the line, including first or last, Jesus stands beside them. Sometimes people on the edges, the fringes, do not feel that they belong – or not fully. So, as you reflect together on this simple experience of belonging in different ways, who might feel that they are on – or even beyond, if that were possible – the edges of your local and/or church community? Given that such feelings are unlikely to come from nowhere, and inequalities are seldom random, what might you do to address them?

**Revelation 22.12-14,16-17,20-21**

We have spoken in the last couple of weeks of how the Book of Revelation uses the imagery of a wedding to describe how the bride (the church) will one day meet with the groom Christ and all will be well at the great consummation at the end of history.

I was at my god daughter’s wedding last Saturday in London. It was a great affair – the service was in Methodist church and the reception was in a marquee pitched in one of London’s Park squares. It was like a scene form Noting Hill or Four weddings and a funeral. I almost expected Hugh Grant to drop in for a guest appearance.

I was sat opposite a young couple who were asking me who I was. When I tell people I’m a church minister it either kills the conversation dead, or they ask questions of religion or get their defenses in early. The couple said ‘we ‘re not religious. We went to a church school, and it put us off.’

I said I’m not religious either -if by that you mean doing meaningless rituals and following rules. But I do believe there is more to life than what we can see and touch. And my connection to God is life giving for me.

They looked at me bemused. The bloke was a Yorkshire man and as a fellow northerner - we share blunt speaking. He said ‘it’s not true. It’s just imaginary’.

I said it’s a mystery, which is different from imaginary. I know when I respond to what I believe are divine prompts and nudges, when I seek and when I pray often, I get answers to those prayers, or deep reassurances of God’s presence, love, and care.

If you don’t believe in God and people today are quite vocal in stating that – its almost a badge of honour – I’m a rational, independent person who doesn’t need the crutch of religion – is often the unsaid implication but it is a safe and boring position. I said often people realize that money isn’t everything. Crises happen and they realize that they are at the end of their human resources to cope, and they reach out for something, someone at that time. Sometimes God comes knocking on their door – they have a spiritual experience that wakens them up. It’s a shame that they have to wait until those moments to experience the excitement, mystery, and awe of faith.

I said to the couple, faith in God is like having the X factor of life. You can be very proud about being self-sufficient, rational I don’t need God. But you are missing out on the adventure of faith. The X factor in life – a relationship with your creator and a partnership in shaping a better world. It is mind blowing.

They said they would think about it – but honestly, they had their mind on buying their first house and moving in together.

He also revealed he was a Leeds fan. Needless to say, the conversation turned to football – and we know that didn’t end well. Perhaps God is a Yorkshire man after all.

The word ‘come’ is repeated frequently in our Bible passage today. For example: verse 12: ‘Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. **13**I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.’ Verse 17: ‘The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

How would you invite Jesus to come into your life? How can we invite friends and family to come to church with us? Who might you invite to come to the next group/church event?

The invitation of Jesus’ to ‘Come’, is recorded many times in the Gospels. Just reflect quietly on these invitations, and to notice which one(s) seems to speak to you.

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| Come, follow me | Come and offer your gift | Come to me all who are weary |
| Come to the wedding banquet | Come and share your master’s happiness | Come, you who are blessed by my Father |
| Come with me | Come and be healed | Come, for everything is now ready |
| Come down immediately | Come, and you will see | Come to me to have life |
| Come to me and drink | Come out! | Come in |
| Come now | Come at once! |  |

There is little escaping the theme in this selection of verses from the end of Revelation: Jesus is coming soon. Indeed, this has been the warning from the beginning. Jesus is coming, and unless the churches in Ephesus and Pergamum repent of their collusion with the cruelties of city life, Christ will come to denounce and destroy them (2.5,16). The inactive church in Sardis is warned that Christ will ‘come like a thief’ (3.3; 16.15). And the church in Laodicea must repent of its complacency and open the door to Jesus (3.20). In contrast, the churches in Thyatira and Philadelphia are encouraged patiently to continue their work because Jesus is coming soon (2.25; 3.11).

After the presentation of John’s vision is complete, and an assurance that ‘These words are trustworthy and true’ (22.6), we hear three more times, ‘I am coming soon’ in the last few verses of the book. The churches must be transformed and ready. They must live in the expectation that Christ is coming soon and all that is described will soon be fulfilled. The light that shone in the darkness, the one who came into the world, will be the undisputed, universal and eternal light of the world. And at this point we might recall every reference, every allusion, to God or Jesus as, in some sense or another, light – the bright morning star, the light to which nations shall come, the brightness of the dawn, and many more. Or as the source of life-giving water – cleansing, renewing and refreshing. Or as the bride of God, filled with mutual desire and passion – perhaps this in particular, as the intimacy of desire brings Revelation, and the Christian Bible, to its conclusion.

We are reminded of these words in every communion service: ‘For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’ (1 Corinthians 11.26). And the letter ends as it began, as does our worship and life itself, with God’s grace in the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you have had teenage children, you will have had those evenings when your offspring have told you they are going out. You say, when will you return. They are vague and say ‘sometime’. You say that’s not good enough – give me a time. Again, they are a bit vague about midnight. And you stay up – or at least stay awake until you hear the door open, and they return.

I have never aged so much as I have in the last ten years as my children have gone through those teenage years.

When are you coming back?

It’s a good question, an anxious question, an unsettling question.

As we have celebrated the ascension of Jesus this week and now wait for the coming of the spirit at Pentecost – which we celebrate next Sunday – Jesus has left the building. When is he coming back? Our atheist friends taunt us with talking to our imaginary friend. Praying to Jesus, who you can’t see. Is he real? Are you deluded? Is faith a form of mental instability? I’ve heard it all.

I often wonder how we would react if Jesus was still here. I’m sure our tabloids newspapers would have a field day: Messiah seen with prostitute. Messiah seen partying and changing water into wine – but can’t solve the pandemic. Messiah tells rich person to give all their money away to the poor. How will this solve the cost-of-living crisis?

I could go on. The scriptures tell us that when Jesus returns, everyone will know he is the Lord, and every knee shall bow. The room for doubt and skepticism will be over.

For the moment, you can’t see the Spirit. Just like you can’t see the wind. But you know the effects. And the life of faith is partly learning to trust and read those effects, nudges, prompts, feelings, and thoughts, whilst also learning discernment hat you are not being delusional.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus invites the thirsty to come to him and drink, and ‘out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’. The evangelist comments, ‘Now he said this about the Spirit’ (John 7.37-39). This association of the Spirit with thirst and desire infuses our reading from Revelation. The Spirit awakens our desire, impelling us as ‘the bride’ to wish for the water of life, and to say to Christ, ‘Come’. Our praying ‘in the spirit’ (Revelation 1.10), ‘Come Lord Jesus’, engages our deepest desires and our longing for fulfilment, to be truly loved and fully alive both to God’s presence and to the needs of all the thirsty invited to drink.

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The book of Revelation presents a fantastical picture of what is going on ‘behind the scenes’, in heaven. In the final chapter Jesus utters the comforting words that, no matter what chaos is happening on earth, he is ‘the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end’ (Revelation 22.13). All is held in God’s hands. We sense the longing behind this vision – the longing, then as now, for the ‘water of life’ (22.17), for hope, inspiration, and the reassurance that all will be well. Such refreshment is vital, if we are to do our bit to love those around us, cherish the beauties of nature, and contribute positively to a society which is struggling.

The lectionary reading picks out the consoling, uplifting verses and omits the disturbing description of the ‘sorcerers, fornicators, murders, idolators…’ excluded from the new Jerusalem (22.15). This is ironic, given that the other omitted verses warn that whoever ‘takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy’ will also forfeit their share in the tree of life and the holy city (22.18-19). And there are questions to be asked about who is being labelled in this way and described as ‘dogs’ (Rev 22.15).

Perhaps it is right in worship to emphasize the inclusion of ‘anyone who wishes.’ But for those who have suffered abuse and violence, perhaps it is important to know that there is a safe place that those who continue to love falsehood will not seek to enter. There are consequences for our actions. People need to be safe. How does society protect itself from people who are a genuine threat, in ways that are humane, fair, and non-discriminatory?

Although we need hope and inspiration, it shouldn’t be at the price of religious and cultural amnesia. Revelation’s vision of a heavenly utopia is achieved at the cost of excluding those who don’t fit. And there have been shameful episodes in Christian history when such a policy has been imposed on earthly societies.

*Ann Conway-Jones is Chair of the Birmingham Council of Christians and Jews writes:*

Three weeks ago, a [Service of Repentance and Commitment](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0mx7lbzfHQ) was held at Christ Church Cathedral,[[1]](#endnote-1) Oxford, on the 800th anniversary of the 1222 Synod of Oxford, which forced [English Jews to wear an identifying badge](https://ccj.org.uk/blog/rebeccaabrams). England was the first country in Europe to impose this measure on its Jewish population – seven centuries before the Nazis. And in 1290, England became the first country in Europe to expel its entire Jewish community. Before we feel complacent that such things would not happen today, let us remember that our government is planning to remove all human dignity and power of choice from those who look to us for refuge, and [ship asylum seekers to Rwanda](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-61523009).

Let us take hope and encouragement from the uplifting verses of Revelation. Let us pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit to refresh and inspire us, to give us faith in the power of love. And let us have the humanity and humility to resist the polarising forces which seek to exclude those who are not like us.

If you’re old enough to remember the Spice Girls, you probably remember this line from their debut song: ‘Tell me what you want, what you really, really want’. If Jesus asked us the same question, how might we respond? As we dare to name our desires and longings, do we recognize God at work in our lives, drawing us to himself? As Augustine famously wrote, ‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.’ The problem is that we can misunderstand this restlessness, and look for satisfaction in the wrong places. But Jesus speaks very simply into our lives: "let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

Picture yourself this time tomorrow: where will you be, and what will you be doing? Now imagine that you suddenly get a message from Jesus, saying, ‘Coming in five minutes.’ How would you react? The full message is quite sobering: ‘See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work.’ This won’t frighten us if we already belong to Jesus, but it does remind us that we have choices to make. And our willingness to respond with a truly heartfelt, ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’ is a good test of our priorities.

Prayers of intercession

Loving God, we so long for the world to be at peace – but war rages on. So, we pray today for those who live in war zones, especially in Ukraine where the battles are intensifying and the casualties are rising, but also for those places that have slipped out of the news but where fighting continues. We pray for all who have been displaced from their homes as a consequence of war and oppression.

Lord Jesus, come into our world afresh
and turn longing and fear into belonging and peace.
Amen.

Compassionate God, we long for our children and schools to be safe and our hearts are breaking at the tragedy in Texas. We pray for those who have been killed and injured, for children and teachers traumatised by the shooting, for grieving families, for the emergency services and for those entrusted with the making of gun laws.

Lord Jesus, come into our world afresh
and turn longing and loss into belonging and comfort.
Amen.

Generous God, we so long for every child to be fed and for every community to thrive – but hunger and poverty blight the lives of so many. We pray for those turning to violence and crime to get what they need, for those protesting and campaigning and for the places where there is civil unrest due to the cost of living. We pray for a fair sharing of the earth’s resources, and for ethical farming practices and trade deals.

Lord Jesus, come into our world afresh
and turn longing and scarcity into belonging and plenty.
Amen.

Wise God, we pray for politicians and those in power, for our own government, for the newly elected government in Australia. We pray for those engaged in diplomacy across the family of nations, and for all those who abuse power. We pray for transparency and accountability for all those who hold public office.

Lord Jesus, come into our world afresh
and turn longing and power into belonging and servanthood.
Amen.

Living God, we pray for your church around the world and in this place. We long to see your kingdom come, and we ask that you will use us to be your hands and feet and voice, wherever there is need or isolation or grief. We pray you will help us to be good stewards of your creation, good listeners where people are struggling, and good companions where people are searching for you.

Lord Jesus, come into our world afresh
and turn longing and loneliness into belonging and fellowship.
Amen. Come Lord Jesus. Come soon.



A prayer for all ages together

Lord Jesus, you love us and we belong to you.
Thank you that you come to us,
and you call us to come to you.
Help us to say ‘Yes’ to your love,
and to know you more and more.
Amen.



A sending out prayer

Lord, we have come together,
and now you send us out with your blessing.
As we go out,
come, Lord Jesus!
As we go home,
come, Lord Jesus!
As we go to work, school or college,
come, Lord Jesus!
Wherever we are,
be with us, Lord Jesus!
**Amen.**

1. *Ann Conway-Jones is Chair of the Birmingham Council of Christians and Jews* https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/119-may-june-2022-c/easter-7/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-1)