**18th June 2023**

**Call to worship**

Your story is part of God’s story.
Let’s join together as the people of God
and celebrate who we are in Christ,
ready to share God’s love with everyone we meet,
knowing that each one of us is God’s treasured possession.

**A gathering prayer**

Living God,
who walked among us,
who moved into our neighbourhood,
we come to find our place in the bigger picture of your world,
to find our story in your story.
May our lives entwine together,
as we draw closer to you.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Eternal God, we have heard your story, read your story, felt your story.
As we gather in worship, may we know deep within us that your story lives on and that your story involves us, and is woven through the history of time with us as a part of it.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Amazing God, your story is written on paper, etched in our minds and on our hearts, enacted in our living and our loving, and displayed in our words and our deeds.
We adore you and we want others to do the same; but first they need to hear your story and how our story touches your story.
We want others to know you as we know you, to be amazed as we are amazed, to adore you as we do.
We know you love each and every person; may telling our story reveal that truth to those we meet and greet in every part of our lives.
May our story resound with praise and adoration, for you are the God we adore.
**Amen.**

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

**A prayer of confession**

Forgive us, creator God, if our story is not as you want it to be –if it is marred or dishonest, if it is littered with mistakes, if it gives the wrong impression of who you are. Forgive us if our story does not really reveal the love, care and compassion you have for all people. Forgive us if our story stops people coming to know you, or to find in you redemption, forgiveness and new life. Forgive us if our story doesn’t express how much your story matters to us.

As long as we live, may our stories be a vehicle for your never-ending love.

**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Your love, O God, has forgiven, redeemed and cleansed us.
Your Word has spoken, your fire has cleansed, burning the dross, making us pure.
We are yours, we have felt your power; assure us now that we are forgiven and part of your ongoing story.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

We sing to the Lord and worship with joy;
for we never forget that the Lord is God.
God made us and to God we belong;
we are God’s people, we are God’s flock.
We gather with each other to give thanks to God,
we enter with praise and thanksgiving in our hearts.
For the Lord is good, the Lord’s love is eternal,
and the Lord’s faithfulness lasts for ever.
God’s story has led us, inspired and transformed us,
called us, acknowledged us, loved and redeemed us.
Almighty God, our voices sing your praise,
our hearts offer our thankfulness.
**Amen.**

**Praying for Fathers**

Father of all, we thank you for your loving kindness and care for us.
Thank you for giving us families, to mirror your love and to teach us to love others.
We thank you especially today for our fathers and all that they do for us.
Bless them and uphold them, that they may be shining examples of fatherhood
and reflect your love to their children.
We ask this in the name of your Son, our Brother and our Lord, Jesus Christ.
**Amen.**

Lord God, you are the perfect Father to us all.
Bless all fathers in the world today.
Give them love, to share with their children.
Give them wisdom, to teach their children.
Give them courage, when the job seems hard.
Give them patience, when things don't go to plan.
Give them strength, to carry their children when they are tired or frightened.
Give them love, to share with their children, and let it be enough.
**Amen.**

Dear God
We pray for all children whose fathers have died, or whom they do not see any more.
We pray for any children who are frightened of their fathers.
Please bless and protect these precious children, and help them to know your healing love.
**Amen.**

* So, you have decided to put up a shelf in the spare room and are gathering the materials and tools needed for the job. What do you need to assemble before you can start? Shelving material, a drill, rawl plugs, brackets, screws, screwdriver, spirit level –it’s quite a list. Jesus is sending his team out to share the good news about him – what does he say they need to be kitted out with? It does not seem to be such an extensive list. What lessons are there for our church mission programme here?

* Jesus said that key to effective mission was accepting hospitality from people. What does giving and receiving of hospitality mean to you? What makes a good host? Do examples of hospitality from the Bible –from Abraham’s visitors to Mary and Martha hosting Jesus and his team – offer helpful insights? How does hospitality set the tone for conversations about life and faith? Apart from getting together to share food, in what other creative ways can we both offer and receive hospitality in our communities?

* ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’ How do we join in with God’s harvest? In the previous verse, Jesus had compassion because the people were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Who are the harassed and helpless in our communities? Life is hard for many. How do we share God’s story with those around us? What is our role in mission? How do we tell our story? How do we stand up for what we believe in? How do we shake the dust off, if people will not listen? Where do we go? In the film [Freedom Writers](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0463998) (2007), one woman, a teacher, transformed the lives of a helpless community of students that everyone else had given up on. They were heavily embroiled in gangs and drugs. Through her compassion and enthusiasm, she encourages them to study and tell their stories.

* We have been given the authority to tell God’s story, with no required or measured outcomes – that is God’s work. Ours is to tell the story and keep it simple. The famous quote attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi is ‘Preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words’ (although, apparently, he didn’t say it!). Does this quote have any credibility or mileage? How do we tell Jesus’ story without words? Is it a better way of demonstrating the power of God in our lives? How do we do this in reality? How do our actions tell the story of God’s love for us?

**Matthew 9.35-10.8(9-23)**

Matthew gives an overview of Jesus’ ministry – teaching, proclaiming the gospel and healing. Then Jesus gives his disciples the commission and authority to replicate and extend this ministry more widely.
This week, questions we might ask are: how do we share our story in light of God’s amazing transforming story? How do we keep it simple and inviting to those around us? We will explore how together we can be labourers in God’s harvest.

**Gladys Aylward**

Gladys born in 1902 to a working class family. To her parents early on it was obvious that Gladys was not going to be the brains of the family. She was not suitable for school, terrible at maths. She left school at the age of 14 and started work as a parlour maid in London. She loved this kind of work, long hours and little pay, but worked in west end of London and loved to see the rich and famous and loved the restaurants, the gambling. As a maid she was walking through the streets and she noticed a group of youths outside a church and they beckoned to her to come into the church for a service. She thought this is not how I’m going to spend my evening going to church. But they linked arms with her and led her in. she was really cranky about this and sat there grumpy in the pews surrounded by these youths. She listened grudgingly to the sermon and thought she had heard it all before. But the thing is the speaker spoke with such urgency and reality that she felt uneasy about it.

 The minute it was over she wanted to get out. She headed out but just as she was almost out of the building someone in the crowd shouted out to her, ‘Miss Aylward I believe God is wanting you’. She said, ‘don’t worry I don’t want him’. The person said back ‘well you might not want him but he certainly wants you’

That really made her upset and she was disturbed by the experience. She stayed that way for a long time to the point when she decided to go and visit a local clergyman. But he wasn’t home and so she ended up speaking to his wife. This woman understood Gladys. She helped Gladys to see that she had to decide as to whether she had to reject God in the way she was living or she gave her life for God. And so without any fanfare or commotion Gladys knelt down and prayed and asked the Lord to come into her life. She said, ‘well God, take me on’.

One day she was reading an article in the newspaper, and it mentioned China. She was fascinated about China and that there were millions of people there who had never heard of Jesus, indeed not heard of god. She thought we should send people, we should tell these people about the Lord. She talked so much that her family and friends kept saying ‘Gladys what has China got to do with you? Her dad said ‘all this talk about China Gladys. What do you think you can do? Are you a nurse? No. Are you a teacher? No. Can you even speak the language. No. So what good do you think you can do in China. You’re only good at talk talk talk.

Gladys ran out of the room crying. But when she stopped she thought, ‘that’s it I’m good at talking’. So she decided to book herself into China Inland Mission college in London. She learnt lessons of Chinese and worked in the local communities in the slums and worked with women and children. Gladys was the most neat and practical of all the women there. She was the only one who could control the slum kids in Sunday school. She had a wonderful way of speaking to the women in the slum area around London. But she couldn’t cope with the college lessons. It was in one ear and out the other. She couldn’t get the language. She didnt pass any of the exams. And so, the committee with great sorrow said ‘no you’re not fit to be a missionary in China’.

So, she packed her things with no plans about what next. So sure God called her to China but it was crushing this verdict.

She worked as a maid in Bristol for a missionary couple who gave her a card that said ‘Be not afraid, remember the Lord is with you’. She kept it in her bible. She worked in the slums of Bristol and experienced poverty like nothing before. She was in the hostel for girls and worked with the women and the men who were drinking themselves into oblivion.

She worked with such efficiency that people said Gladys this is your calling - not to China. But Gladys felt otherwise.

Gladys said if God had called her to China, she would have to go by herself. She went to a travel agent and said ‘excuse me but what is the cheapest way to get a one way ticket to China? Travel agent was a bit alarmed. You would have to go by train. Its not safe. Especially for a single woman. Give me the ticket she said. £47 to travel third class. Gladys booked her ticket. She started working hard to get money together.

A missionary in China Jeanie Lawson had asked for help. Gladys thought’ That’s me’.

She set off from London with two suitcases with all her worldly possessions! Sped across Europe but became aware of how lonely she was because she couldn’t communicate with anyone. She was detained by soldiers, caught up in fights, escaped from a hotel, on a boat. Ended up in Japan. Had to get British embassy to help her get to China.

When she got there she expected to meet Mrs Lawson. But when she arrived no one had heard of Mrs Lawson nor where she lived. But some missionaries took her in and passed her around contacts until some did know of Mrs Lawson.

You just need to ride by mule two days journey from this city. So Gladys still battered and bruised and wearing the same dress she had left England in and her two suitcases was bundled on to a mule and bounced her way to Yang Shen city a rural city in the mountains. Gladys not thrilled to see it. It was old and poor and crumbling. When she finally knocked on Mrs Lawson’s door she snapped ‘who are you?’ that was how Gladys arrived in China.

Mrs Lawson actually thought Gladys was a gypsey selling pot. After that first encounter, they got on well. Both fiery characters with a lot of energy. They both decided to transform the place they lived into an inn. No ordinary inn but for the mule drivers and traders who went through the city to city. They would offer hospitality and food. They would also share the Bible stories. Gladys had to stand outside to get the customers. She thought her first words in Chinese would be Jesus loves you. But her first words were taught to her by Wang the cook: ‘no fleas no bugs, all good, come come come.’

It didn’t really work at first. Mrs Lawson said you need to jump out in the road and drag the mule into the courtyard. It worked and they found good food and a bed. but they also heard about Jesus. It grew in reputation and the mule drivers actually recommended to other mule drivers that they should stop there. You get free entertainment they said.

Gladys running errands through the streets soon surrounded by crowds of children who would yell at her . She started copying the phrases and picked up Chinese quick. She changed her name to a Chinese one Ài Wěi Dé- a Chinese approximation to 'Aylward' – meaning 'The Virtuous One'

Mrs Lawson became ill after a fall and after a year in China for Gladys Mrs Lawson died. Gladys was not part of a missionary organisation so had no money. She was expected to pay local taxes and she didn’t know what to do. But just at that time when things were looking hopeless. Gladys was visited by the governor of Yang cheng. He said he would like to appoint her as his chief foot inspector. Gladys not sure what to make of that but she did feel it was from the Lord.

Foot binding was still happening in China. It was the ancient practice of taking feet of little girls and crush them into bandages so they be tiny. If you had tiny feet you were deemed to be more beautiful. If had big feet no chance of getting married. Practice outlawed in China in 1912 but rural areas ignored it. Government trying to stamp it out. Needed a foot inspector. Couldn’t be a man – that would be inappropriate. Gladys as a foreigner was ideal to go and inspect women’s feet. She was paid to travel round all villages and meet the women and persuade them not bind the feet of their children.

She said to the governor ‘Ill do it on one condition. Can I speak to all the women about the living God’.

 ‘Does your living God promote foot binding?’ asked the Governor.

 ‘Certainly not’ said Gladys.

‘Yes you can talk about what you like so long as you get rid of foot binding’. He replied.

It was the perfect job for Gladys. She had two soldiers go with her to make it official.

This was where her father’s words rang true: ‘all she could do was talk talk talk’. She was an incredible storyteller and women couldn’t wait for her to return. She adapted the bible stories to Chinese culture – and soon churches were springing up in these rural towns.

One day asked to go the prison. The mens’ prison was a horrible place. The Governor summoned her and said ‘We have a riot in the prison. They are killing each other with machetes. You need to go in and sort it out. All the prison officers have fled for their lives.’

Gladys was a tiny little woman. ‘You want me to go in? Why me?

The governor said ‘You have been telling everyone that you have the living God living inside you so why don’t you go into the prison with the living God and sort it out.

Gladys thought ‘It doesn’t work that way’.

But then she thought what a wonderful testimony. Of course, I should do it. She prayed to God: ‘I have no choice. They do believe that you are with me. Lets sort this out.’

She walked into the prison and she could hear the screams and there were dead bodies everywhere and pools of blood. A man ran towards her and raised his machete and then suddenly Gladys became angry and said ‘you stop that right now’. He froze. He could see a little woman in bright blue dress. He didn’t know what to do. All the screaming stopped. All looked at her. She was shaking on the inside but knew she only had a few moments. She said ‘All of you over here right now. Drop your weapons. Form a line’. And they did. ‘What were you doing?’.

She could see they were starving. Covered in boils, several had died of starvation. She had compassion for them. She said clean up this courtyard and I will appeal to the Governor on your behalf. She said to the Governor ‘I have one request. Do not punish the prisoners for what they have done and we are going to make some changes to this prison’.

 In next few weeks weaving looms were delivered to the prison. Garden beds dug. Prisoners worked in teams. They made new clothes. Bred rabbits for meat . Even grew their own grain. The prison was transformed. Prisoners now had a regular visitor who would speak about Christ and many came to faith.

Gladys however was still lonely. She prayed for a husband. But Lord didn’t give her one. She wrote in the corner of her bible. ‘Lonely. The very word can start tears. But those who walk with Christ can never walk alone. Alone but never alone for he is here.’

One day saw a sick starving girl and a woman. The woman was trying to sell off the child. Gladys went to the Governor but he said it was a black market and not to get involved. She was outraged. She knew only way of helping her was to buy her. She was only five year old. The woman wanted 100 coins, but Gladys showed she only had nine pence in her pockets. The woman took the money and walked off. The girl was called nine pence after that. She was one on many children who were delivered to Gladys door. No need to be lonely any more,.. she had many to care for.

Gladys realised d that she was not quite connecting to people in China as she had hoped. She realized the Lord wanted her to deal with her national pride. She was still British at heart and she realised this was holding her back. And so she did something that no missionary had ever done. She destroyed her British passport and renounced her British citizenship and became a Chinese national. She had no idea of the repercussions of that as the second World War was just starting to rumble in the distance. Japan had already started their assault on China..

No one thought that would impact them as they were so far inland in the mountain area.

But in the spring in 1938 rumble of planes. They dropped a barrage of bombs. Gladys was buried in rumble. There was carnage in the streets. Gladys took the lead in helping the wounded and clearing the rubble. Japanese Soldiers were two days away. She knew the strategy was to send in the bombs first to weaken the city and then follow that up with a ground invasion to take it. She told the governor they had to get people out today. Gladys had travelled the area and she knew of a village not on the map near caves and she led people there. But so dangerous because Japanese advanced at alarming rate.

She heard the only place safe was on the other side of the Yellow River. Gladys left with a hundred children and one other missionary. They had no transport. How would they get there? By foot. Walk over the mountains and the hardest pass. And then somehow get over the river.

She didn’t know whether the Lord wanted her to do it, but then she read the Bible verse which said ‘flee you to the mountains to the hidden places because the King of Babylon has conceived a plan against you’ (Jeremiah 49.30). She took it as a direct command from the Lord to get out.

They set off, a hundred children led by this tiny woman, on a 200 km walk. It was very difficult. Children soon ran out of enthusiasm and food. They slept out in open or in rocky outcrops. Shoes torn, feet cut and bruised. Sometimes they had to pass young up one by one on dangerous paths. Walked for two weeks. Finally they saw the Yellow river and made for the banks. But to their dismay all the villages were deserted. All the boats and ferries gone. Gladys arrived too late. She wept. She had brought the children so far but the Japanese were behind them. How could they cross.

They stayed there two days. A teenage girl then said to Gladys ‘you told us there was a Bible story about Moses who came to a river and he prayed to God to cross the Red sea. And they walked across. Why aren’t you praying for God to part the river?’

Gladys was a bit annoyed at this question. She said ’because I am not Moses’. The girl said ‘I know you’re not Moses but isn’t God still God?’

Gladys sat up. She realised that she had been sent on this trek by God. Why would God abandon her at the banks of the river? She had doubted and forgotten. The fear of the situation had taken over. She called the children together and they prayed and sang hymns. Meanwhile a Chinese national soldier was on the other side and he called some other soldiers to come and investigate. They saw this group of people of 100 children. They got a boat and came over – ‘why are you here?’ they asked. Gladys persuade them to get a boat to ferry them over. Finally they were all safe on the other side of the river.

They walked to another city with all the refugees. And got on trains to Shien. But it was too late. Can’t take anymore refugees they said. Go elsewhere. Exhausted they went to Pew Fen. Finally after 27 days of travel they were able to find safety.

Rest Gladys did not. She wanted to find out what needed to be done. She found a Christian church. but collapsed exhausted on the church floor. No one knew her. But doctors came and said she had exhaustion and pneumonia and typhoid fever. She was delirious. She was so ill it took her three months to recover. Missionaries took her in and looked after her. She never fully recovered. The fever affected her brain. But she still carried on undeterred. After 17 years in China she was persuaded to go back to England to see her family. No one recognised her when she got off the train. Even her family had to page her on the loud speaker at the train station.

But fame preceded her. A journalist had written an article in Time magazine. Letters home to her mum meant that her mu had been speaking about her. The Mayor of London wanted to meet her. Gladys felt overwhelmed. Not what expected. She was still a parlour maid at heart. Can’t do these invitations. Friends said ‘do you not think they have souls that needed saving as well?’ That was it for Gladys and she realised a new situation and that she would make the use of the opportunities. She even met with the Queen.

At one Womens Social meeting Gladys came to speak. Women were more interested in scones and tea. But Gladys got into full flight. ‘And then God said to Abraham ‘Get Out’ she shouted. The women fell out of their chairs. Gladys challenged them that if God calls us God provides for us. What is God calling you to do? She spoke for over one hour more than she should have done. But there were no complaints.

She went to see one lady at her home. Lady said ‘my husband spend all time at pub . The he is violent when comes home. Gladys clasped her hand. ‘We shall get him out of that pub. We shall pray him out of that pub.’ She prayed ‘Lord get him out of that pub. Make his beer taste horrible. Make him hate the sight of it and make him push it across the counter. Make him get out the door and make him come home. The Lady was most surprised at the prayer but as they said Amen there was a knock at the door. It was her husband.

Gladys was so famous there was Hollywood movie. She was on the BBC and TV. Not tempte3d by fame and fortune she gave all her money away to mission and orphanages. Her heart was still in China. But things were so different as Communists had taken over and were hunting down missionaries. Instead she went to Taiwan. There were so many refugees. She worked among them and lived in same way as before, renting a room and preaching. She cared for children who came cross her path. One person even broke into her house to give her a child. So she was mother to many. But with all this she still suffered from some confusion and illness. But she still travelled all over the world and stared orphanages all over.

She wrote to friends: ‘I’m told I have low blood count. I am on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I have bad dreams. Not sure what is real or a dream. But I know I am trusting him and he will see me through’.

1969 at Christmas she developed pleurisy. Slipped away in the New Year at the age of 67. Friends found written in corner of her bible

‘Lord keep me strong in the sense of thy call’

And indeed the Lord did. The Lord is faithful.

What is the Lord calling you to do? The Harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the Harvest to send out more labourers into his harvest field’

**Prayers of intercession**

Living God,
we pray for those for whom sharing their stories and faith is costly and dangerous,
places where Christians are in the minority and persecuted,
places where the Gospel has been distorted and manipulated,
places where it has been sidelined.
We pray for our churches in all their diversity and in all their challenges,
and for ourselves as we live out our faith and answer Gods call on our lives.

God of truth,
Christ of Compassion,
Holy Spirit of healing,
strengthen and inspire all those we have prayed for;
**and empower them and us to share your story and ours,
simply, passionately and honestly. Amen.**

We pray for all those sucked into a culture of knives, fear and crime.
We pray for those whose stories of transformation have the power to challenge, change and transform the lives of others, especially ex-prisoners, ex-gang members, ex-drug dealers and recovering addicts.

God of truth,
Christ of Compassion,
Holy Spirit of healing,
strengthen and inspire all those we have prayed for;
**and empower them and us to share your story and ours,
simply, passionately and honestly. Amen.**

We pray for places that have been in the news this week,
places where there have been violent deaths, remembering especially the students and people of Nottingham.
We pray for people who have had their stories shared in the media,
for those who have witnessed what no one should see
and experienced what no one should go through.

God of truth,
Christ of Compassion,
Holy Spirit of healing,
strengthen and inspire all those we have prayed for;
**and empower them and us to share your story and ours,
simply, effectively and honestly. Amen.**

And we pray for those whose stories have been cut short by illness and tragedy,
especially those we know and those who suffered alone.
We pray for those who continue to share their stories even as life gets more difficult,
for those whose faith shines brightly even in the darkest of times,
for those whose legacy is transformative.

God of truth,
Christ of Compassion,
Holy Spirit of healing,
strengthen and inspire all those we have prayed for;
**and empower them and us to share your story and ours,
simply, effectively and honestly. Amen.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Lord Jesus,
thank you that my story is part of your story,
and yours part or mine.
Thank you that I can bring anything to you,
joys and sorrows, highs and lows,
and know that you care for me,
because I am your special treasure.
**Amen**

**A sending out prayer**

Transforming God,
as we go from here,
may we be full of your amazing story,
wanting to share it with those we meet,
so that more lives may be transformed.
**Amen.**