**29th October 2023**

**Call to worship**

We gather in the light and love
of God who calls us his children.
We gather in the glow of our
Christian family here in this place.
May God’s love burn within us.
May hard hearts melt like wax,
and God’s love shine in our faces,
as we worship the God who is love.

**A gathering prayer**

We come to worship the God of love.
We come to worship Jesus, who shows us how to love.
We come to worship the Holy Spirit,
who inspires and awakens love in our hearts.
Be with us now, O God,
as we come to worship!
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Compelling God, we have come from different places – with different needs, with different ideas, with different experiences, with different hopes, and with different emotions.
As we listen to your word, sing our praises and join in prayer, may your love make of us one family, one
fellowship, one body, ready and able to serve our community and our world.
In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Creator God, may we love, cherish and care for creation as you do. Jesus, servant, king, may we love and seek out those in need, those in danger – as you do. Holy Spirit, spirit of freedom, may we love and free people from all that robs them of purpose and confidence – just as you do.
To your glory. **Amen.**

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

**A prayer of confession**

Forgive us, eternal God,
when we choose not to love and serve:
those who are different from us,
those who have come from different places,
those who believe in different things,
those who mix in different circles.
**May your love compel us to change.**

Forgive us when we choose not to reach out to:
those we don’t understand, those we don’t like,
those we don’t think deserve our help,
those we are estranged from.
**May your love compel us to change.**

Forgive us when we justify our negativity towards:
those who have disappointed us,
those who have challenged us,
those who have done better than us,
those who have moved on from us.
**May your love compel us to change.
Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Gracious God, as you call us to forgive others, so you forgive us – time after time. As you compel us to love others, so you love us – day after day. As you invite us to reach out to our neighbours, so you reach out to us – again and again. In Jesus name – thank you.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise**

God of all the world,
for the gift of love: **we praise you;**
for gentle love, for tough love: **we praise you;**
for hesitant love, for confident love: **we praise you;**
for human love, for love towards animals: **we praise you;**
for costly love, for joyful love: **we praise you;**
for all the shades of love, for all the colours of love: **we praise you;**
for the silence of love, for the music of love: **we praise you;**
for the now of love and for the eternity of love: **we praise you.**
In Jesus’ name: **we praise you. Amen.**

**A simple worship activity          W** **E** **S**

**A prayerful exercise that you can do every day.**

* Invite everyone to sit quiet and still for a few moments. Gradually become aware of your breathing – in…and out. Tap a count of four using the four fingers of one hand.
* Now, breathe in while tapping/counting to four. Then hold for a count of four. Breath out to a count of four. Pause for a count of four. Repeat the whole cycle four times.
* Next choose two or three words that bring God close – e.g. ‘I am’, ‘God is love’ – and two or three that represent what God brings – e.g. ‘love’, ‘peace’. Imagine breathing in one of the former (‘I am’) and then breathing one of the latter ‘peace’ out into the world.
* Finally, combine the breathing/counting with the in/out words. Suggest that this is something that can be done at anytime and anywhere.

Active worship

A visual prayer W E S

Explore ‘How big is my heart?’

You will need: A4 sheets of paper, pens.

Ask everyone to draw a heart shape on their sheet of paper. Invite them to think about those they love, the people who care for them, pray for them, and provide safety and sustenance, and people who are friends and companions. Then they should write/draw their names (or initials) inside the heart.

Then invite people to think of those they find it hard to like or to love, people they would rather avoid or never see again, who are hurtful or bullies. How do they feel about these people? Write/draw their names/initials and the feelings around the outside of the heart. Then draw a new heart shape that encompasses all the names on the paper as a reminder that our hearts can expand with the help of God’s love.

**Thought for the week**

**Read out in place of a sermon if you wish**

‘Granny, how much do you love me?’ asked Olivia. ‘This much,’ answered Granny, throwing her arms as wide as could be. ‘But why?’ asked Olivia. Granny thought for a moment. Then she began to pour her cup of tea. Olivia watched, waiting. She poured… and poured. The tea slowly filled the cup. It reached the brim. ‘Granny!’ exclaimed Olivia, as the tea began to flow over the edge. ‘Stop; it’s spilling!’ But Granny continued to pour. Despite Olivia’s protestations, they both watched as the tea filled the saucer, then spilled onto the worktop beneath. Olivia quietened; she watched as the tea puddled and began to drip off the edge onto the floor. Eventually Granny stopped pouring. ‘I love God, and God loves me,’ she explained. ‘I have so much love in me, it just keeps overflowing to you!’

To love God involves more than devotional times, more than charitable service, more than keeping commandments. To love God truly requires complete commitment of heart, soul and mind. The proof of such commitment is not a baptismal certificate or service, nor vivid testimony shared in public (as important as these may be as expressions of commitment). The proof is a life of love.

**A prayer for all ages together**

(*make heart shape with hands*)
**Thank you, God, for loving me.**
(*make heart shape with person next to you*)
**Thank you, God, for everyone who loves me.**
(*make heart shape with neighbour at arm’s length*)
**Thank you, God, that we can bring love to people even in times of distress and hurt.**
(*shake hands or make a peace sign with those around you*)
**Thank you, God, for the skills and gifts that bring peace and healing.**
(*move forward three steps, then back three; repeat three times*)
**Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Amen.**

**Matthew 22:34-46**

**Sermon**

A lawyer asks Jesus which is the greatest of God’s commandments. Jesus, quoting the Old Testament, says: ‘Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself’.

For many people they get stuck on loving themselves.

Many people find it difficult to love themselves.

It may be that we never felt loved by our parents, so grew up never quite sure whether we had any value or were worth loving. It might have been difficult experiences at school, where the feeling that we were too fat, too ugly, or too thick meant that we were never accepted and always felt left out of whatever was going on. It may be that we were rejected at a crucial point of life when we felt very vulnerable, whether by a marriage partner or a close friend. It could be a mix of all of these, but the bottom line is that most of our insecurities trace back to a sense that we have not felt loved. The more a person feels loved and loveable, the more they are likely to be a secure, stable and integrated person.

Last weekend I was away on holiday. As a special holiday treat, I bought myself a Sunday newspaper. In the self and wellbeing section was an article written by a therapist, Lucy Cavendish. She writes[[1]](#endnote-1):

*It happened to me the other day when I was on holiday on my own. I was sitting on a beach, sun hat on, book in hand, and I found myself watching the young families around me and realising I no longer fitted in. More than that I didn’t really know whether I actually did fit in, I imagined them looking at me and thinking that I was some sort of remaindered woman, husband less, child less, sitting reading like a washed-up former heroine of a novel.*

*It was a moment, but then again over the last six years since I turned 50, I’ve been experiencing so many moments that it now feels like pretty much like a constant buzz of dis-ease within me. I have, over the years turned from someone who is generally prone to happiness and a sort of sustaining optimism to someone who feels somewhat irrelevant. Now that my identity as a working mother of four young children has gone, I feel in a nutshell ‘lesser’. I feel as though I am in the shadows, fading into invisibility, which leaves me asking who am I?’*

The article goes on to explore the area of self-love and how many feel untethered and even afraid.

She quotes relationship coach and author Greg Wheeler who refers to Maslow’s five tier hierarchy of needs, which are physiological (food and clothing and shelter), safety (job, security) love and belonging (friendship) esteem and finally self-actualisation. He says that once our lowest needs are met, the self esteem part is often defined by our behaviour patterns with others, that is getting our needs met by giving to others.

He says, it is typical that how we feel about ourselves and our sense of worth, is dependent on how we feel others feel about us. This includes the usual stuff, such as family and friends, but this self can become untethered in later life as the tectonic plates around us shift.

In essence as we age the loss of, or change in, key relationships sets us adrift from those who could meet those needs. Thus, the slowing down of life gives the darker elements of our self a chance to come to the fore. This can create feelings of loss of safety, purpose, value and identity and feeling loveable.

So, what we can we do? He suggests it is vitally important to find some deep acceptance of self and more importantly to love our new emergent self. This is self-love where we work to know our true feelings, needs and desires and passions and honour them by embracing them, sharing them and enforcing them. We can then acknowledge that we are loveable, amazingly perfectly imperfect.

So, all we need to do is love our new self! Non judgementally – wherever your needs and desires and passions lead you.

His advice seems to contradict what he said earlier. That however much we may be loved by others, if we don’t think we are, that is what counts.

Many of us have a crippling inner voice that keeps telling us that no one could possibly love us because we are too much of a loser, too stupid, too worthless to love. Those inner voices often go back to negative experiences we have had in life which we internalise. And it’s difficult to just erase that soundtrack – counter to the advice this wellness guru suggests.

From a biblical perspective the order of things is reversed. Love God, love your neighbour, as you love yourself.

We start with the love of God.

For many in our society they struggle to believe in God. The origins of the universe lie in the big bang a huge cosmic upheaval and for many, there is no particular purpose behind this event, that it arises not form any prior consciousness or mind or divine intelligence, but by chance, even if the process of natural selection from that point onwards adds an element of purpose – the purpose for survival.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Is life just ‘full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’ to quote Shakespeare’s Macbeth? If all that we see around us is contingent on something else – something necessary – what is that necessary thing like? The answer to that question surely matters as it determines the way in which this world operates and how we understand ourselves within it. It also determines how we treat each other – are my neighbours, my friends or even my children the products of random chance? Do they signify nothing? Are all forms of life ultimately in a competitive race for survival which will determine how we treat them if the chips are down?

That’s why in answer to the question ‘who am I?’ the bible starts with focusing on God, not us. That’s why in worship, we look beyond ourselves and give worth to the person of God, the ultimate reality.

In Jewish traditions the Shema was a way of carrying God’s Law into daily life. We can do the same – i.e., memorize Scripture passages to recall God’s presence in the joys and trials of daily life. Not just a reassurance in times of trial, but also to bring a transformational challenge into a situation we might otherwise prefer to ignore or walk away from or hide in the voice of the majority.

Christians believe that God is love.

There are many things that theologians and people can debate when it comes to certain topics in the Bible, but one topic there can be no debate about is that the nature of God is love and God’s call for us to love others.

John in his first letter says *let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.****8****Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.****9****This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.****10****This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.  1 John 4 .7-10*

We are loved first and foremost.

If we realise that, hopefully that results in reciprocated love. And that love is shown in how we love the people God loves too. How we love our neighbour.

Love your neighbour as yourself…

Loving assumes a kind of self-love. Most of us take care of ourselves. We have to assume responsibility for ourselves. Loving our neighbours requires that we look after ourselves first. That we have enough to eat, safe shelter and somewhere to sleep, access to health care, leisure time to enjoy and contact with friends. Then loving our neighbour demands that we make sure they have those things as well.

The word itself appears roughly 310 times in the Bible (depending on the version you read). If we truly love God, then it follows we must truly love others too.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Right now, we are witnessing a world dominated by hate and anger. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is horrific, inhumane, and quite frankly, heartbreaking. Now more than ever we need to demonstrate our calling to love others. Easy to say, but what does that look like from the comfort of relative safety?

I think the Bible can help us. Out of those 310 mentions, 106 are referring to ‘agape’ love. This is the kind of love that revolves round action. It is a sacrificial love – oozing with kindness, compassion, and empathy.

Often, we associate love with romantic feelings. Of course, romance is precious. Some of the best things we can experience. However, it is a kind of immature love. The emotions of romantic love may be the initial stirring that draws two people together, but it doesn’t usually keep them together. Sometimes that intense feeling fades and nothing replaces it, which is when the relationship runs into trouble. In a healthy relationship it matures into something more solid and reliable, less dependent on the attractiveness of the beloved.

Most of us get saggy, wrinkled and set in our ways as we get older, so love needs to depend less on feelings of attraction than on something that can grow within us: a capacity to love, to put someone else’s needs above our own, regardless of who they are or what they look like. Maturity as a human being means becoming this kind of person.

It may not sound attractive; but imagine sharing a flat or a house with someone who always puts their needs before yours would be hard to live with. Someone who is capable of always putting your needs before theirs, able to keep giving and wanting what is best for you – that surely would be an ideal partner, friend, colleague.

It’s not about being a doormat and being taken advantage of all the time. Doing what your neighbour wants you to do all the time is not necessarily loving, if what they want you to do is what would harm them or others.

But love is somehow central to our experience of being human. If we don’t learn how to love, we don’t grow into happy people. The first command is essential – those who know they are loved – supremely by God, have the security to love and also know a bit about what love looks like.

Maybe the secret of life is not to ignore what everyone tells you and be yourself and love your new you, your passions, and desires. Maybe instead the secret of life is to love your neighbour. To do that means a radical change to the way you view yourself. To turn outward to our neighbor, to God.

The capacity to ignore the nagging inner voice, the whining self that always wants its ego stroked, its needs constantly satisfied, and instead to think yourself into what your neighbour needs, may turn out to be the secret of contentment. The route to true flourishing lies on the paradoxical path of self-denial not self-discovery.

What does love in action look like for you? How can you demonstrate it? Through prayer? By getting involved in some action? By supporting the church with your time, your money, your gifts. By donating to charities that are trying to provide emergency aid? By speaking out to demand justice and peace? Whatever action you choose one thing is very clear; what the world needs now is love.

*Perhaps we can take inspiration from, and pray for ourselves,*[*Mother Theresa’s prayer*](https://www.azquotes.com/picture-quotes/quote-i-used-to-pray-that-god-would-feed-the-hungry-or-do-this-or-that-but-now-i-pray-that-mother-teresa-84-40-32.jpg)*– the message of which someone summed up as: Be the change.*

[*I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us, and we change things.*](https://www.azquotes.com/quote/844032)

Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

**Prayers of intercession**

We praise you for your love for us;
**help us to show your love for one another.**

God of love, we have read and seen images of people held hostage in the Holy Land. We hear the numbers of those killed and injured. We see buildings in flame and destroyed. We feel as if we are helpless and yet through our prayers we can stand alongside those who are suffering; those whose faces we do not recognise; whose names we do not know; those for whom this conflict has been life-changing. Our prayers are our solidarity with them.

We praise you for your love for us;
**help us to show your love for one another.**

God of peace, it is easy for us to feel helpless in the face of global politics. We ask ourselves how we can influence leaders of Palestinians and Israelis, Russians and Ukrainians. We show our love through our prayers. We ask for wisdom, insight and compassion for the leaders of all nations so that all your children throughout the world may live in safety and in peace.

We praise you for your love for us;
**help us to show your love for one another.**

God of healing and wholeness, your love is shown but seldom acknowledged through the work of those who are involved in healthcare. In homes, in surgeries, in hospital wards and in hospital theatres your love brings hope and healing. We pray for those through whom your love is shown and those who receive its power. Bring healing to those who are sick in body, mind and spirit.  Make them whole in you.

We praise you for your love for us;
**help us to show your love for one another.**

God who calls your children to live and worship together as communities, your love unites and strengthens us through prayer. We pray for the Church in all its different traditions and places. We pray for all who worship you that we may receive your guidance and live and love as you would have us do. May the places where we gather be places of welcome, where love is shown to those who enter and those who remain outside.

We praise you for your love for us;
**help us to show your love for one another.**

God who has called us to be your children, we celebrate your love for us. We bring to you our needs and the needs of our neighbours. We humbly seek comfort, wisdom, hope and strength. May we not be selfish in how we use the gifts you give us. May your gifts for us become an expression of our love for you.

We praise you for your love for us;
**help us to show your love for one another.**

In Jesus’ name we pray.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Go and be empowered by the commandment to love,
encouraged in your ability to love,
and blessed in your receiving and sharing of love, day by day.
In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

1. Lucy Cavendish, Observer Magazine, Oct 22nd 2023 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Graham Tomlin, Why Being yourself is a Bad Idea, SPCK, 2020 Ch 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Lindsay Wright is a*[*freelance writer and designer*](http://www.lwcreative.co.uk/)*based in Lancashire.* [*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2023/127-september-october-2023-a/proper-25/the-week-in-focus*](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2023/127-september-october-2023-a/proper-25/the-week-in-focus) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)