**November 5th 2023**

**Call to worship**

Jesus is the one we follow.
He came to serve,
he humbled himself on a cross,
and he was and is exalted.
Jesus is our pattern and example,
He is our teacher and we are all students.
Let us worship him.

**A gathering prayer**

Jesus is the Way.
**We come to Jesus.**
Jesus is the Truth.
**We come to Jesus.**
Jesus is the Life.
**We come to Jesus.**
Hear Jesus’ words: ‘Come, follow me’.
**We come to Jesus.**
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

God’s light and truth lead us to his holy dwelling place.
Come, let us draw near, in the humbling light of God’s love, and worship our righteous and awesome God.

**A prayer of adoration**

All-powerful, all-seeing God, you are our role model in life.
Father, you beckon us into your kingdom glory,
where there is no room for self as all hearts overflow with your love.
Lord Jesus, our Saviour, you are the light that shines without blemish.
Holy Spirit, full of wisdom, your kingdom integrity is our guide.
**Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we worship and adore you.**
**Amen.**

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

**A prayer of confession**

Father God, we love you, yet often fail to live as you would have us do.
For the times we’ve put ourselves before others, before you;
or we’ve sought admiration and praise;
or we have been puffed up with our own importance.
**Forgive us and humble us.**
We are sorry for times when our speech or conduct has not been
in line with our faith, when we’ve got things out of perspective,
or toed the line of least resistance for fear of repercussions;
when we’ve asked something of others to avoid doing it ourselves.
**Forgive us and humble us.**
We are sorry for times we’ve lorded it over those younger in the faith,
or dismissed their views, and when we’ve thought our ways better,
or not listened to other ideas.
Sometimes we can be blind to our faults,
but a gentle nudge from you can highlight our need to change.
**Forgive us and humble us.
Reveal our blind spots and help us to be good role models
in everything that we do.**
**Amen.**

 **Assurance of forgiveness**

Father God, your love is all encompassing.
No matter what our failings are, your love is unconditional.
You forgive our sins, keeping no record of them. We are forgiven.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

May our heartfelt praises ring out and make your light, O God,
shine brighter amid the hypocrisy and negativity in this world.
You are like an eternal firework lighting up the inky sky.
Unlike an earthly firework, you never fizzle out.
Your love makes life sparkle with joy.
Thank you for the myriad blessings that explode
and colour our lives as we follow you.
Thank you for working in us,
highlighting our blind spots and growing us in faith.
**Amen.**

**Play charades  E**

**Focus on what people do rather than what they say.**

* **Jesus invited people to consider whether what the scribes and Pharisees teach or say is matched by what they do. In charades, actions are used to mime words or phrases. Ask a few people to play charades where everyone can watch, with either a group or everyone calling out their guesses. Start with some that are simple and fun (e.g. walking a tightrope, or taking a shower), then try a few community and/or caring roles (e.g. a teacher or nurse).**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Holy Spirit, *(wave hands like flames in the air)*
inspire our hearts *(hands over heart)*
and minds *(hands over heads)*
to read the Bible, *(make book shape with hands)*
to hear Jesus’ teaching,*(cup hand behind ears)*
and to show the love of Jesus *(arms outstretched)*
in all parts of our lives. *(cross hands in front of chest)*
**Amen.**

**Matthew 23.1-12**

In the late 1990s Debbie and I had just got married and we had our first children in 1997 and 1998. Those of you who have had children will know that once you have them you kiss goodbye to your social life. So Friday evenings, after we had put the children to bed, would be slumped exhausted on the sofa and watching the TV. In those days there wasn’t much choice. It was four or five channels on the TV or you went down to the video shop to hire a video for the evening.

Friday evenings were always about watching Friends on the TV. The internationally successful "Friends," ran for 10 seasons from 1994 to 2004, and turned the stars into permanent celebrities. They played a close-knit group of young adults who spent time at each other's apartments and at "Central Perk," a fictional Manhattan cafe.

One of the major story lines involved a clandestine romance between Chandler and Monica Geller, which the four other friends - Rachel, Joey, Phoebe and Ross - each discovered one by one.  The pair eventually marry.

Actor Matthew Perry, who played the wise-cracking Chandler Bing, died last Saturday after apparently drowning in a hot tub. He was 54.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Police are investigating but say they do not suspect foul play.  He had been open about his struggles with addiction to prescription drugs and alcohol, although his problems were largely kept hidden from public view during the show's original run.

Fame came early to Perry, who once prayed when he was young: “God, you can do whatever you want to me, just please make me famous”. He later referred to it as “very dumb prayer” and, towards what would sadly be the end of his life, he reflected: “Now, all these years later, I’m certain that I got famous so I would not waste my entire life trying to get famous. You have to get famous to know that it’s not the answer. And nobody who is not famous will ever truly believe that.”

In his memoir, "Friends, Lovers and the Big Terrible Thing" published last year, he wrote about the reality of the battle he'd been fighting:

"Hi, my name is Matthew, although you may know me by another name. My friends call me Matty. And I should be dead," Perry wrote in the opening of the book.

But he also detailed a life-changing spiritual encounter which he describes as being like a form of salvation, saying it enabled him to remain sober for a significant period afterwards.

"I started to cry.  I mean.  I really started to cry - that shoulder shaking kind of uncontrollable weeping.  I wasn't crying because I was sad.  I was crying because for the first time in my life, I felt OK.  I felt safe, taken care of, decades of struggling with God, and wresting with life and sadness - all was being washed away.  Like a river of pain, gone into oblivion.

"I had been in the presence of God.  I was certain of it.  And this time I had prayed for the right thing - help."

He wrote that, "everything was different" following that experience: "Eventually the weeping subsided... I stayed sober for two years based solely on that moment.  God had shown me a sliver of what life could be.  He'd saved that day, and for all days, no matter what.  He had turned me into a seeker, not only of sobriety and truth, but also of him."

The news of his death brought an outpouring of grief from fellow celebrities and other high-profile personalities. We don’t know the cause of death. We don’t know whether that encounter with God and the change it brought to Mathew Perry’s life lasted beyond the two years or so of sobriety and whether he acted on that encounter. Spiritual disciplines are there to help us grow in our relationship with God. Prayer, worship, bible study, fellowship, service, sharing in faith and encouraging each other are all vital to sustain the authentic life of discipleship.

Also last Saturday night in Paris, sporting history was made as the South African men's rugby team, better known as the Springboks, clinched the Rugby World Cup for a record-breaking fourth time.

In defeating their greatest rivals, the All Blacks, 12-11, they also became only the second team ever to defend the title, which they won in Japan four years ago, at the expense of England.

They were led to both titles by captain and Christian believer Siya Kolisi, who has regularly taken opportunities on the pitch, during interviews and on social media to praise and thank the Lord Jesus and dedicate everything to him.

Bruce Nadin, a sports chaplain who pastors in South Africa at Stellenbosch FC, has been able to track Kolisi's story of "full surrender to Christ".

"His growth as a disciple of Jesus has been amazing. It's so easy to go out on the field, you know, and say, I give all the glory and honour to God, et cetera, et cetera when you're winning. But what I'd say about Siya is that he's authentically trying to live out his faith.

"The biggest impact I believe he's having is not so much with his words, but actually, with his actions as a leader, both on the field, but I think across the nations. He is a real symbol of hope."

"He never ceases to highlight the challenges the country faces and how far it still needs to go to become everything God wants it to be. And I think, in that sense, his faith is lived out in a very real way. He's an incredibly humble guy."

Kolisi was raised by his church-going grandmother after his father left home when he was young. He has spoken publicly at Hillsong events about how his father would abuse his mother and how, aged five, he would find his mother's teeth on the street.

His family could rarely afford food or clothes for school and he would wear his Aunt's shoes to school. His grandmother and mother both passed away in his school years.

In 2015, Kolisi recommitted to following Christ, whom he credits his grandmother modelling to him for the very start of his life, but he admitted he felt he had turned his back on. He has been honest about battles with alcohol and told BBC Sport in a 2021 interview: "I want people to know that I'm a sinner".

There is a danger of putting any Christian on a pedestal. Nadin said, "A [South African] Christian magazine a couple of years ago had a headline with him on the front, and it said, 'The hope of the nation', and I know Siya would say he's not. Jesus is the hope of the nation, and as a sports chaplain who mentors and disciples Christian athletes, I think we need to remember he's still a young man, and he's had to spend the last eight, nine years of his life with an incredible profile, incredible responsibility.

"And largely speaking, he's handled that really well. But to place that level of expectation on him when the job's already been done by Jesus, I think it's a little bit unrealistic."

"We're just ordinary, everyday pilgrims seeking to work out what it means to follow Jesus, carrying our own baggage, you know, our own defaults towards particular sins.

"And often, our athletes attempt to do this in the public spotlight. And sport, particularly contact sports, is emotional. And it doesn't always bring the best out in us in the moment, as our characters get tested. And I think we actually have to pray for ourselves that we don't judge too harshly. What do we do when somebody cuts us up on the road? How do we react in our cars or in other situations where things don't go our way?

"So I'd say pray for them. Pray that they wouldn't find their identity primarily in their performance or in what people say about them, or in their celebrity or in what they possess. But that they would find it secure in the person of Jesus."

This week the church worldwide has celebrated All Saints Day on 1st November, that overlooked festival because All Hallows Eve, the eve of All Saints Day, commonly known as Halloween, now takes all the attention.

Who has been your inspiration in Christian discipleship and living? Who, for you, is a good example, an authentic role model, of being a disciple of Jesus? The list of names in response to those questions will be very large, no doubt. Some from way back in history, some from much more recent times. Some will be well-known, even famous, either during or after their lifetime. But many, if not most, will be ordinary people called by God not to seek honour or glory but to serve in the place they were called to be – people like us. Who looks to you as an example, an authentic role model, of Christian living?

In the bible passage for today Jesus looks at who isn’t an authentic believer!

Jesus has told several parables that are increasingly open in their criticism of the religious leaders. The ‘two sons’ (21:28-32) highlights their refusal to change their minds concerning his message, despite all the evidence presented to them. The ‘wicked tenants’ (21:33-45) tells and foretells their treatment of prophets and of Jesus himself, and warns that the kingdom of God will be given to those who live as the people of God. The ‘wedding banquet’ (22:1-14) points out their refusal to join in with what God is doing now.

In this week’s passage, Jesus abandons stories and speaks directly, not to, but about the religious leaders: do as they say, not as they do. They have learning, and authority to teach the instruction passed on by God to Moses, so learn from them. But don’t follow their example, because they are concerned about appearances – making a show of practising their religion, wearing oversized prayer shawls (that have fringes, v.5) and reminders of the law (the phylacteries, v.5 – small boxes worn on the arm and forehead during prayer, containing verses from the Torah). They want honour, respect, accolades and titles, but have forgotten that we are all learners, all disciples, and are here to point others to God. Their blind spots are so significant that they are keeping people out of God’s kingdom.

The religious leaders were perhaps unaware of what people saw in them as role models. Experts in their subject, they had lost sight of the need for authentic behaviour to accompany this knowledge. What do people see when they look at us? Who are we following, and how can we become aware of our blind spots? The religious leaders needed someone to ask them these questions. Jesus does so forcibly.

You can see why Jesus got himself crucified. Powerful and wealthy people don’t like criticism and will use their wealth and power to silence others.

Jesus goes on to say seven woes on the religious leaders in the rest of the chapter: Mainly that they are blocking the work of the kingdom (v 13) and neglecting the big things like justice, mercy and faithfulness (v 23-24) and replacing a living relationship with God with ritualism (25-26), looking good on the outside but inside their lives are full of decay (27-28).

We always need to practice what we preach. [1 Peter 3:15](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Peter%203%3A15/) states: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” The Greek word translated as ‘reason’ here is ‘apologia’. The exhortation to speak with “gentleness and respect” is vital and communicates the truth that we are not just to *preach*good news but to *be*good news. We need to treat people with love and courtesy and eschew any methods that are manipulative or coercive. The interesting thing to note from this verse is that Peter states: give an apologia “to everyone who asks you” – he presupposes that Christians are living lives that call forth questions.

There will be many who we engage with who, when we share that “Jesus is the truth and that the truth has set me free”, will want it to be true. At that point you and I will be exhibit A, in terms of them establishing the voracity of our claims. This is not to say that people are looking for perfection, but they *are*looking for authenticity. Sadly, the Church has often been closely associated with the opposite of authenticity (hypocrisy). There is much work to be done in this area.

On 7 July, 2005, four Islamic extremist suicide bombers attacked London’s transport network. Hundreds of people were injured and 52 were killed. Some months later, the Revd Julie Nicholson, whose 24-year-old daughter died in the attack, stood down from leading a church. While she still felt called to ministry, she felt unable to preside at Holy Communion and to lead words of peace, reconciliation and forgiveness, when these words and actions did not reflect her own feelings. For her, this was a matter of integrity . How willing are we to be honest about our struggles and ensure that what we live out is authentic?

Jane Haining was born in 1897, into a strong Christian family in a peaceful rural idyll in Dumfriesshire. Outstanding achievements at school led to a successful working life in Glasgow – which is how she came to be there, in 1927, to hear God calling her. She retrained and devoted the rest of her life to caring for young girls in The Scottish Missionary School in Budapest.

During a visit home in 1939, with war imminent, Jane was not persuaded to remain safe in Scotland. Her memorial in her birthplace records her response: ‘If these children need me in the days of sunshine, how much more will they need me in days of darkness.’ She returned to her duties but was soon arrested by the Gestapo and accompanied some of her children to Auschwitz where she perished. Some school pupils survived the death camp, and remembered her commitment, dedication and care for the rest of their lives.

Eventually, in 1997, on the 52nd anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Jane Haining was recognised on the wall of honour in the Garden of Remembrance in Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, as one of the ‘Righteous Among the Nations’ – an award given to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. What began as an ‘ordinary’ Scottish life will now forever be remembered for her faithfulness to Jesus’ own ministry and sacrifice as a servant of humankind.

Of course, Jane Haining is not the only one. There are many whose lives are an example and an inspiration to others, to us. Some may be well known even famous, either during or after their lifetime. But many, if not most, will be ordinary people called by God not to seek honour or glory but to serve in the place they were called to be. Ordinary people like us. Saints in Christ.

God bless you as you follow the one who said he was the Way the Truth and the Life.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord God Almighty, creator of the world, we bring your world before you. A world in turmoil. A world battling against itself. A world in which we see evil rampaging.

We pray for your hand on Israel and Gaza and all nations involved in conflict. We pray safety for hostages and comfort for their families. We pray for children left orphaned, for all those suddenly bereaved, and for all who are displaced and have no safe refuge.

Almighty Lord, November 5th in this country sees fireworks colouring the sky, the smell of bonfire smoke and toffee apples mingling in the air. But we pray for all those today living amid the real fear of air strikes, of enemy explosives lighting the sky and bringing devastation. We pray for those caught up amid the destruction, choking in the dust-filled air. We pray for all people experiencing heartbreak and hunger.

Almighty Lord, bring peace, hope and reconciliation. May all look to you and the safe comfort of your arms.

Lord God Almighty, creator of the world, we pray for the unrest in this country fuelled by the war in the Middle East. We pray for the targeted. We pray for your Holy Spirit to speak into the hearts of the perpetrators.

Almighty Lord, change hearts. Give wisdom to the government to dilute and deal with the growing situation. Move hearts, Lord. Bring calm to our streets.

Lord God Almighty, creator of the world, we bring before you all people who work in the mission field. We pray for all the saints who have gone before, spreading your word of truth, bringing your love in practical ways. Be with all those you call today to walk your path.

Almighty Lord, we pray safety around all those who walk in dark places. Make hostile eyes blind to the activities of those who carry out your work. Keep from harm all who go into danger zones to offer practical aid in your name and bring salvation.

Lord God Almighty, creator of the world, we bring before you the church. We pray for all called to the ministry of sharing your word, of leading your flock in the light of your love.

May those chosen to lead be upright and true. May your word be paramount and not compromised by pampering to worldly values.

Almighty Lord, grow your Church. We pray truth and justice on all in authority. We pray for those leading your Church, members of parliament and those in local government. May their intentions be honourable; looking to serve you and your people not power and prestige. Bring a stability to our nation. Lead us, Lord by your light and truth.

Lord God Almighty, creator of the world, we bring before you all who work and reach out to the less fortunate. We pray for those people whose homes and businesses were flooded during the recent storm and who live with the dread of further rainfall. We bring our local communities to you.

Almighty Lord, be with the lost, the lonely, the vulnerable, the suffering. Help us to be good neighbours, to shine your light in dark places and be authentic witnesses to those you place in our lives.

Lord Jesus, hear us we pray.

**Amen**

**A sending out prayer**

Go into the world with Jesus
as your inspiration, guide and friend.
Be generous, without always counting the cost.
Give of your time, without always seeking a reward.
Share your love with a needy world.
Make peace and strive for justice.
And do it all in Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

1. <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/god-had-shown-me-a-sliver-of-what-life-could-be-friends-star-matthew-perry-dies-at-54?utm_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=daily%20news%2030%20October%202023_14184176&dm_i=16DQ,8G0KW,KCOFX7,YVC4P,1> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)