**Sunday 24th October 2021, Service of Worship led by Ken Greer**

**Welcome and Opening words**  
Good morning, and welcome to worship this morning. My name is Ken Greer; I am a non-serving Elder at Bamford Chapel and Norden URC, and a member of the Rochdale, Bury and North Manchester Missional Partnership.

The Psalmist says “The Lord will protect you from all danger; he will keep you safe. He will protect you as you come and go now and forever.”

The Lord will always be with us, so let us worship and praise him. Let us commence our worship this morning by singing that great hymn of God’s love and forgiveness, “Amazing grace- how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me”

**Hymn: Amazing Grace**

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| 1.. Amazing grace how sweet the sound,  that saved a wretch like me;  I once was lost, but now am found  was blind, but now I see. | 2.. T'was grace that taught my heart to fear,  and grace my fears relieved;  how precious did that grace appear  the hour I first believed. |
| 3.. Through many dangers, toil and snares,  I have already come;  'tis grace has brought me safe thus far,  and grace will lead me home. | 4.. When we've been there ten thousand years  bright shining as the sun,  we've no less days to sing God's praise  than when we've first begun. |
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**Prayer**

Now let us come to God in prayer, as we make our prayers of Praise and Confession.

Lord, we give thanks for our senses which allow us to appreciate all the wonders you have created. Our eyes see all the beauty you have made, the wonderful hills and mountains of the Lake District, the breath-taking lakes themselves, the wonders of architecture, everything which our sight allows us to see. We give thanks for the smell of new mown grass, of freshly baked bread, for all the wonderful smells of flowers, and everything our sense of smell allows us to enjoy. We give thanks for our hearing, which opens up the world of music to us, the sound of laughter, children’s voices, all the familiar noises, with which the world surrounds us. We give thanks for the sense of taste, the wonderful variety of flavours , which we experience in our food. We give thanks for the sense of touch, the joy of stroking a pet or hugging someone you love. We give thanks for all of these senses, but remember in our prayer, all those who have lost one or more of these senses. We give thanks for everything you have done for us, Lord, for the way you provide for our every need, for the way you care for us on our life’s journey, for being a loving father, showering us with your blessings. But, Lord, we know we have failed you in so many ways and on so many occasions. You asked us to care for your world, but we have failed miserably in our task, abusing the trust and letting your creation suffer almost irreparably. Help us rectify our carelessness and make our world like the place you would want it to be. We bring all these prayers together using the words that Jesus taught his disciples, saying” Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

**Children’s Address**

Good morning to all our young people

I read a story the other day about a violinist who was playing his violin on a street corner in London. I front of him was his cap and in it were a few coins that passers-by had tossed in as they passed. A little girl was passing and stopped to listen intently to the man playing.; eventually her parents tugged her away from the performance. What very few people realised was that the night before, the man had been playing to a capacity crowd in one of London’s concert halls, where the cheapest seat had been £50! Here he was playing the exact same music for free, to reach out to people who maybe were put off going to a concert hall, or couldn’t afford to go. He definitely had touched the heart of the little girl; she had been captivated by his music. I wonder if she had gone home and pestered her Mum and Dad to let her learn the violin; if she did, they probably all would have had a miserable year or two, because children learning the violin is not a good time, as I remember from bitter experience. The little girl maybe had a calling to learn the violin, a vocation, as we sometimes describe it. If you get a calling to do something, you should think very seriously about doing it, especially if the person doing the calling is Jesus and he is asking you to follow him.

Let us sing the hymn, “Just as I am”

**Hymn: Just as I am**

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| 1. Just as I am, without one plea,  but that Thy blood was shed for me,  and that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,  O Lamb of God, I come! I come! | 2.. Just as I am, and waiting not  to rid my soul of one dark blot,  to Thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,  O Lamb of God, I come! I come! |
| 3.. Just as I am, though tossed about  with many a conflict, many a doubt,  fightings within, and fears without,  O Lamb of God, I come! I come! | 4.. Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;  sight, riches, healing of the mind,  yea, all I need, in Thee I find,  O Lamb of God, I come! I come! |
| 5.. Just as I am, Thou wilt receive,  wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve:  because Thy promise I believe,  O Lamb of God, I come! I come! | 6.. Just as I am, Thy love unknown  hath broken every barrier down;  now, to be Thine, yea, Thine alone,  O Lamb of God, I come! I come! |
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**Bible Reading: Isaiah 35:1-8a & Mark 10:46-52**

Let us hear the word of God as we listen to our Bible readings, first Isaiah 35 v.1-8a, and then Mark 10 v.46-52

**Isaiah 35:1-8a - Joy of the redeemed**

**35**The desert and the parched land will be glad;  
    the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.  
Like the crocus, **2**it will burst into bloom;  
    it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.  
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,  
    the splendour of Carmel and Sharon;  
they will see the glory of the Lord,  
    the splendour of our God.

**3**Strengthen the feeble hands,  
    steady the knees that give way;  
**4**say to those with fearful hearts,  
    ‘Be strong, do not fear;  
your God will come,  
    he will come with vengeance;  
with divine retribution  
    he will come to save you.’

**5**Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
    and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
**6**Then will the lame leap like a deer,  
    and the mute tongue shout for joy.  
Water will gush forth in the wilderness  
    and streams in the desert.  
**7**The burning sand will become a pool,  
    the thirsty ground bubbling springs.  
In the haunts where jackals once lay,  
    grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

**8**And a highway will be there;  
    it will be called the Way of Holiness;  
    it will be for those who walk on that Way.

**Mark 10:46-52 - Blind Bartimaeus receives his sight**

46Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means ‘son of Timaeus’), was sitting by theroadside begging. 47When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’

48Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’

49Jesus stopped and said, ‘Call him.’

So they called to the blind man, ‘Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.’ 50Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

51‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, ‘Rabbi, I want to see.’

52‘Go,’ said Jesus, ‘your faith has healed you.’ Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

**Hymn: Thou whose almighty word**

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| 1.. Thou, whose almighty word  chaos and darkness heard,  and took their flight:  hear us, we humbly pray,  and where the gospel day  sheds not its glorious ray,  let there be light! | 2.. Thou, who didst come to bring,  on Thy redeeming wing,  healing and sight;  health to the sick in mind,  sight to the inly blind,  O now to all mankind  let there be light! |
| 3.. Spirit of truth and love,  Life-giving, holy Dove,  speed forth Thy flight;  move on the water's face,  bearing the lamp of grace,  and in earth's darkest place  let there be light! | 4.. Blesséd and holy Three,  glorious Trinity,  wisdom, love, might;  boundless as ocean's tide,  rolling in fullest pride,  through the earth, far and wide  let there be light! |
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**Sermon**

I have recently been reading Russell Osman’s new novel, called “The Man who died twice”, which by the way I can heartily recommend. At the very end, in his acknowledgements, he makes a plea for us to support independent bookshops. “Use it or lose it” are his words. It reminded me of the slogan in Lidl (I think, or maybe Aldi!), “When it’s gone, it’s gone!” This is a one-off opportunity, if you don’t seize it now, you will never have another chance. And this was what was facing Bartimaeus as he sat by the roadside.

Bartimaeus had been born with normal sight, but for whatever reason, had gone blind. In a world where there was no social welfare, being blind meant being unable to work and becoming almost an outcast from society. People believed that any disability was a punishment from God for serious sinning, and as Bartimaeus had sight at birth, the sin must have been his and not his parents. He sat by the roadside every day, begging, and fortunately for him, giving alms to a beggar was considered a righteous deed for a good Jew, so he scraped by.

This day, with that heightened awareness that a blind person possesses, he could feel something different was happening, there was an excitement in the air. Something special was happening. He learns that Jesus of Nazareth is going to pass by, as he leaves Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. Could this be his one chance? As I said to the children earlier, vocations can be made in such brief moments, what could he do? This could be his only chance, and he shouts out, “Son of David, have mercy on me” The crowds around him tell him to be quiet, but Bartimaeus persists, and shouts all the louder. And Jesus in the midst of the uproar, hears his cries, and has pity on him.

He calls for the man to come to him, and Bartimaeus is told that Jesus wants to speak with him. He springs to his feet, throws his cloak aside, which may have been just about his only possession, and hastens to meet Jesus. Jesus asks him simply what he wants, what does he want Jesus to do for him. It almost is like the Genie and the bottle, but for Bartimaeus it is a very simple question with only one answer, he wanted to see again, and he knew that this was the only person who could grant him his wish. Bartimaeus had total faith in Jesus, only he could cure him, and for his faith he was rewarded. What do we want Jesus to do for us? In our prayers, what are we asking him to do, to give us? Bartimaeus could have asked for money, but he asked for the thing that would change his life, his sight. That was the transforming gift and changed his life in a new direction. It meant he could become a useful member of society again, get a job, built a new life. But, of course, what direction did he take; he followed Jesus, and we don’t know what he saw with his newfound sight, did he follow Jesus to Jerusalem, did he see the triumphal entry with the palm branches spread on the road, did he witness the Crucifixion? Having his sight was going to mean seeing good and bad. We don’t know where his journey finished, but we do know that his immediate response was to accompany Jesus, the source of his new found life.

Bartimaeus recognised who Jesus really was; he cried out “Son of David”, this echoes the Gabriel’s message to Mary, and the references in the prophets, that the Messiah would be of the house of David. He also felt that Jesus would be able and would be willing to help him, that Jesus cared for people. In the days before this, the disciples had been arguing over who was the greatest among them and who was going to have the best seats when Jesus came to glory. They had completely missed what Jesus wanted and what he represented, the Suffering Servant.

I wonder what we offer Society today. Do we find out what people want, or do we just assume that what we have offered for the last how many years is still relevant and what people need? We are faced with a massive challenge. How do we grow the Church? As I look around today, I see a lot fewer people than would have been here pre Covid, where have the others gone? Have they just got out of the habit, have they found something else to do on a Sunday morning, are they still afraid of Covid or do they feel that our message is no longer relevant to them? And that is only those who previously filled our building, what have we to say to those who have never been attracted to enter our doors? This is the challenge that lies ahead, and it is not an easy one to face. We must make the Church relevant to our society and make the message of Christ’s love for the world something that we want to share with everyone. It is not an easy challenge, as I have said, but with Christ’s help, it is one that we can achieve.

**Hymn: Let us sing “Will you come and follow me”**

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| 1.. Will you come and follow me,  if I but call your name?  Will you go where you don't know  and never be the same?  Will you let my love be shown,  will you let my name be known,  will you let my life be grown  in you and you in me? | 2.. Will you leave your self behind  if I but call your name?  Will you care for cruel and kind  and never be the same?  Will you risk the hostile stare  should your life attract or scare,  will you let me answer prayer  in you and you in me? |
| 3.. Will you love the 'you' you hide  if I but call your name?  Will you quell the fear inside  and never be the same?  Will you use the faith you've found  to reshape the world around  through my sight and touch and sound  in you and you in me? | 4.. Lord, your summons echoes true  when you but call my name.  Let me turn and follow you  and never be the same.  In your company I'll go  where your love and footsteps show.  Thus I'll move and live and grow  in you and you in me. |
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**Let us now have our Prayers of Intercession for others**

Lord, we pray for our world. Every day, when we look at the news, we see the terrible things that are happening – the volcano in Palma, the fires which have been sweeping across so many countries ,in some places, droughts, in others , floods. We see war in Afghanistan and other countries, people losing their lives, their homes, so many terrible things happening. Help us to help those in our world who are in need.

We pray for our country. We have been experiencing so many problems over the last two years. First the problems with Brexit, and then the arrival of Covid-19; we still are feeling the repercussions of this disease, and our prayers are with those who have suffered from it, the families of those who have lost their lives, and those people for whom life will never be the same again due to it. We pray for the Government as they face many difficult decisions in the months ahead, and we pray for a return to normality.

We pray for Rochdale. WE fear again racial tensions springing up in our town, and we pray that an understanding of all people and all races and religions will spread throughout our community. We pray for refugees coming here, and we pray for all those trying to help them and bring them into our community.

We pray for our Missional Partnership. We remember our ministers, Richard. Daniel and Kate in our prayers, and we pray that we will be led in the way we need to go in the future. Some of us feel lost at present, drifting without a clear view of where we should be trying to go, show us the way, Lord, show us the way. We pray for the new Eldership, that we are electing, and ask all those involved to consider it seriously.

Finally, Lord, we pray for ourselves. Many are still living in fear of leaving the security of their homes. Be with all, who are apprehensive about the future, and those who are too ill to be with us today. Lord, hear our prayer

Amen.

**Our closing hymn is “The Lord’s my shepherd”, adapted by Stuart Townend**

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| 1.. The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want.  He makes me lie in pastures green.  He leads me by the still, still waters,  His goodness restores my soul. | 2.. He guides my ways in righteousness,  and He anoints my head with oil,  and my cup it overflows with joy,  I feast on His pure delights. |
| 3.. And though I walk the darkest path,  I will not fear the evil one,  for You are with me,  and Your rod and staff  are the comfort I need to know. | Chorus: *And I will trust in You alone,*  *and I will trust in You alone,*  *for Your endless mercy follows me,*  *Your goodness will lead me home.* |
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**Blessing**

May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit, rest and abide with each and every one of us this day and for evermore.