**Sunday 14th March 2021 – Rochdale, Bury and North Manchester Missional Partnership**

**Service of Worship**

Good morning and welcome to worship this morning. My name is Ken Greer, and I am a non-serving Elder at Bamford Chapel and Norden Church, which is part of the Rochdale, Bury and North Manchester Missional Partnership.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son that whosoever believed in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

What an incredible gift! And how can we ever hope to repay it? Fortunately God doesn’t think like that, but we still feel that we should be doing something in return. Well, we can do something this morning, and that is to come and praise our Risen Lord.

Let us commence our worship with the hymn, “Shine, Jesus, shine”. You can just listen to the words on the recording, or join in with the singing, the choice is yours!

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| 1.. Lord, the light of your love is shining,  in the midst of the darkness, shining:  Jesus, Light of the world, shine upon us;  set us free by the truth You now bring us -  shine on me, shine on me. | 2.. Lord, I come to Your awesome presence,  from the shadows into Your radiance;  by Your blood I may enter Your brightness:  search me, try me, consume all my darkness  shine on me, shine on me. |
| 3.. As we gaze on Your kingly brightness  so our faces display Your likeness,  ever changing from glory to glory:  mirrored here may our lives tell Your story -  shine on me, shine on me. | Chorus: *Shine, Jesus, shine,*  *fill this land with the Father's glory;*  *blaze, Spirit blaze,*  *set our hearts on fire.*  *Flow, river, flow*  *flood the nations with grace and mercy;*  *send forth Your word, Lord, and let there be light!* |
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Having worshipped God in song, let us come to God in prayer, let us pray.

O Lord, at times like this we feel totally inadequate to do justice to the task of praising you. You are so much beyond anything we can imagine, and we recognise the problems facing artists, who try and portray you, your glory and majesty are beyond our comprehension.

And yet, you are still a Father to us, and love each one of us, just as if we were an only child. How can so much love pour out on such undeserving individuals? But yet you have continued to love us, even though we have continued to fail you. You even went to the lengths of sending your only son, Jesus to share our human existence, so that he might save us, and pay the price that really should have been paid by all of us. What a loving Father!

Lord, you are beyond our knowledge, and yet when times are hard, we can sense, and know that you are right beside each of us, no matter how insignificant we may feel. Your guiding hand reaches out to us, and your reassuring words give us the strength to face whatever challenges may lie ahead of us.

We know we don’t deserve this love for we continue to fail you at every turn. You have told us to spread your word abroad, but so often we are scared to grasp the opportunities that are presented, or don’t even recognise them as opportunities . We feel we don’t have the skills to tell others of what you can do to change their lives, but don’t do anything to get those skills, and don’t recognise that the easiest thing we could do is just to open our hearts and minds to you in prayer, and let you lead us in the way you want us to go.

You told us to love our neighbours as ourselves, but when we look at our world, we see how we have failed miserably in this task. We see countries torn apart by warfare, we see people starving, although there is enough food to more than adequately feed the world, we see in our own country the homeless sleeping on the street, and most recently the sight of the rich countries having a surplus of the Covid vaccine, while the poorer nations are left to suffer.

Father, forgive us we pray you and give us another chance to be more like Jesus. We want to be like him, but on our own, it seems too much to achieve. We need your help, and we know if we ask for it, you will help us, weak though we are.

And now let us bring our prayers together, using the words that Jesus taught his disciples, and say,

“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

And now a word for the boys and girls, who may be watching this morning.

What special day is it today? You all shouted out so loud I could almost hear you! Of course, it is Mother’s Day, or Mothering Sunday.

There are lots of special days nowadays, Father’s Day, Gran’s Day, lots of others, but these are all a fairly recent invention by the greeting card companies, to be able to sell more cards!

Mothering Sunday is different; it dates back to the 16th century. It started as the Sunday when people would attend their “Mother” church, usually their local cathedral. In those days lots of the poorer people used to work for the rich as servants, and the tradition started of people being allowed to go home to their mother, frequently taking a Simnel cake with them.

Bamford Chapel doesn’t date back to the 16th century, but it was built in 1801, but other churches round here date back much further. I have taken services in Stand, which dates back to 1665. It was “mother” church to Besses o’the Barn and Radcliffe, members from Stand going out to establish these new churches. Just like them let us try and spread the Good news of Jesus even further.

If we were meeting in Church this morning, you could tell me all the great things you had done for your mother today, Breakfast in bed, cleaning, tidying your room. But presumably you do those things every day of the year! You love your mother, but if we only make her special on one day of the year, just think how much God must love us to make us special every day of the year. Thank God for loving us so much that he gave us his only son, Jesus, to be a shining example of how to live our lives.

And now let us sing our next hymn, highlighting how much God loves us “Love Divine, all loves excelling”.

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| 1.. Love divine, all loves excelling,  joy of heaven to earth come down:  fix in us Thy humble dwelling,  all Thy faithful mercies crown.  Jesus, Thou art all compassion,  pure, unbounded love Thou art;  visit us with Thy salvation,  enter every trembling heart. | 2.. Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit  into every troubled breast;  let us all in Thee inherit,  let us find Thy promised rest.  Take away the love of sinning,  Alpha and Omega be;  end of faith, as its beginning,  set our hearts at liberty. |
| 3.. Come, almighty to deliver,  let us all Thy grace receive;  suddenly return, and never,  never more Thy temples leave.  Thee we would be always blessing,  serve Thee as Thy hosts above,  pray, and praise Thee without ceasing,  glory in Thy perfect love. | 4.. Finish then Thy new creation,  pure and spotless let us be;  let us see Thy great salvation,  perfectly restored in Thee:  changed from glory into glory,  till in heaven we take our place,  till we cast our crowns before Thee,  lost in wonder, love, and praise. |
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And now we turn to our scripture readings, first from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 2 v.1-10, and then from the Gospel of John 3 v.14-21.

My text this morning are the words of Jesus, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have everlasting life.”

I was talking to the young people earlier about how much a parent cares for a child. We would do anything to protect them from harm, but how much greater is God’s love for mankind, that he would be willing to see his son die an incredibly cruel and undeserved death as a scapegoat for all of us.

As Paul said in his letter to the Romans, “It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person. It might even be that someone would die for a good person. But God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us.”

These words of my text were spoken to Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a leader of the Jewish community; a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the ruling body of Jewish life. He visited Jesus in the evening , probably because he was reluctant to be seen visiting a preacher who was already becoming notorious in Jewish circles. But Nicodemus knew that Jesus was special, that he held the key to life. Later he defends Jesus in the Sanhedrin and later goes with Joseph of Arimathea to request the body of Christ from Pilate, so that they could bury Jesus.

The text I used is one of the most familiar in the Bible, and could be described as the Gospel in a nutshell. Possibly because it is so familiar, we don’t examine it as carefully as we would something which was new to us. So let’s look at it this morning.

Firstly , look at the width of God’s love. For God so loved the world. Not just a few but everyone. Initially God had chosen the children of Israel to be his special people, but that was for a purpose. When God calls Abraham, he tells him in Genesis 12 that through him all the nations of the world will be blessed, and that this blessing will be manifested through Christ, the Messiah. This had been prophesied in Isaiah 49, when Isaiah said of Israel, “ I have a greater task for you, my servant. Not only will you restore to greatness the people of Israel who have survived, but I will also make you a light to the nations, so that all the world may be saved.” The Good News is not for the few, the insiders, the rich, but it is freely available to all, rich, young, old, poor, to anyone who believes in Christ.

So what was it that God gave us? Only his only begotten son as the Authorised Version puts it. And “begotten” has a special meaning, it means unique, one of a kind, irreplaceable. We hear echoes of the story of Abraham and Isaac here. Abraham and Sarah were quite elderly and then they had a son, Isaac. He was the apple of Abraham’s eye, but to test him, God told him to sacrifice the boy to God. Before Abraham could bring the knife down, God stopped him, Abraham having proved his obedience to God. But here there is no one telling God not to make the sacrifice, he knows it is the only way to save his creation, and regardless of the pain, he has to go through with it. It’s almost beyond our comprehension, that God could love us so much after all the ways that mankind had failed him, that he could make this gift to all of us.

But there is a condition to the gift. Everyone who believes in him will be saved and have everlasting life, not everyone will get it. Once again Isaiah had so accurately foreseen the future, when in Chapter 53, he says, “All of us were like sheep that were lost, each of us going his own way. But the Lord made the punishment fall on him, the punishment all of us deserved.” As I said, there are no other qualifications, no matter how good or bad you are, if you open your heart to Jesus, you will be accepted. But this puts quite a burden on us. If people will only be saved if they believe, how are they going to learn about Jesus, and make the correct decision. For so many people nowadays, the Bible is a closed book. They don’t realise its importance, the difference it can make to their lives. It is our job as modern day disciples to open their eyes and give them the knowledge to make the right choice.

Nicodemus had quite a long discussion with Jesus, and the other major topic touched on was being “born again”. This quite flummoxed Nicodemus, “How can a man re-enter his mother’s womb?” Of course Jesus was not talking about a physical rebirth but a spiritual one, and that applies to all of us. People get very hot under the collar about being born again; some Christians seem to feel you are not a proper Christian unless you can provide the exact time and day that you had Damascus journey experience . But what about all of those of us who have grown up in the church from childhood, and have seen our faith develop over time. Are we not equally good Christians? But even if we have been Christians all our lives, are we allowing Jesus to be the central point of our life? Let us pray as we come out of lockdown, that we will all give Jesus a greater priority in our lives. He deserves it!

And now let us join in the hymn “ God forgave my sins”, Freely, freely, you have received, freely, freely, give

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| 1.. God forgave my sin in Jesus' name;  I've been born again in Jesus' name,  and in Jesus' name I come to you  to share His love as He told me to. | 2.. All power is given in Jesus' name  in earth and heaven in Jesus' name;  and in Jesus' name I come to you  to share His love as He told me to. |
| Chorus: *He said, 'Freely, freely you have received,*  *freely, freely give;*  *go in my name*  *and because you believe,*  *others will know that I live.'* | Carol Owens  ©1972 Bud John Songs.....  Ccli 169737  Streaming Licence 595811 |

Let us join together in our prayers of Intercession.

Let us pray for our world

At the moment, the Covid pandemic dominates our thinking. We give thanks for all the scientists, who with your help have made such incredible steps in finding vaccines to protect us. We pray that we will be able to share these vaccines fairly around the world, so that all nations will be protected and lives saved. We look forward to the forthcoming conference on climate change, and pray that all countries will be able to work together and do their part in saving our planet. We still see war and starvation stalking our world, and we pray that we will all play our part in making our world a better and fairer place

Let us pray for our country

We give thanks to you , Lord, for our NHS. We pray for all the doctors, nurses, ambulance staff, cleaners, and all the other people who work tirelessly without any thought for their own safety, to protect and cure us of this dreadful virus. So many have paid the ultimate price with their own lives, and we hold them and their families up to you in our thoughts. We pray for our government. Be with them in the difficult decisions that face them every day, and guide them in the right way to bring our country out of the dreadful period we have experienced. As our schools return, we rejoice that our children can get back to their education again, and we pray for all their teachers as they face new challenges to make sure that all pupils get back to a level playing field.

We pray for Rochdale

We see so many shops closed downtown, and we wonder what will happen in the future. Lord, be with all those that have lost their jobs during the pandemic, and we pray that they will soon be able to get back to employment, either in the same field as before, or in a completely new challenge. During the past months, we have seen a rise in mental health problems. Help us if we are struggling, and help us to be aware of others, and that we will be sensitive to all the new opportunities that will arise in the coming months and years. We also pray for all those charities that have been starved of money raising opportunities in the past year, and are struggling for the future. Help us to support these great works so that they can help those in need.

Let us pray for our Missional Partnership

We give thanks for our ministerial team who have led us through this period, and we pray that we soon will see a return to worship in our churches. It has been a difficult time for many, and many feel lonely and isolated without their weekly meeting with friends at church. We bring to you all those of our church family that are ill or face operations in the coming weeks. Be with them and their families, and let them know that they are surrounded by our love and your healing arms.

Finally, Lord, we pray for ourselves

We pray for each and every one as we face the continuing challenges. The pandemic has changed our lives, but let us move forward confidently, knowing that we will not be alone on that journey, but that you will be beside us every step of the way

And now in a moment of silence, let us bring to God the things and concerns that we have not touched on already in this prayer.

We bring all these prayers to you, Lord, hear our prayers.

Amen.

Our closing hymn today is “In Christ alone”

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| 1.. In Christ alone my hope is found, He is my light, my strength, my song;  this cornerstone, this solid ground,  firm through the fiercest drought and storm.  What heights of love, what depths of peace,  when fears are stilled, when strivings cease! My comforter, my all in all,  here in the love of Christ I stand. | 2.. In Christ alone - who took on flesh,  fullness of God in helpless Babe!  This gift of love and righteousness,  scorned by the ones he came to save till on that cross as Jesus died,  the wrath of God was satisfied,  for every sin on Him was laid;  here in the death of Christ I live. |
| 3.. There in the ground his body lay,  light of the world by darkness slain,  then, bursting forth in glorious day,  up from the grave He rose again!  And as he stands in victory sin's curse has lost its grip on me,  for I am His and He is mine -  bought with the precious blood of Christ. | 4.. No guilt in life, no fear in death,  this is the power of Christ in me;  from life's first cry to final breath,  Jesus commands my destiny.  No power of hell, no scheme of man  can ever pluck me from His hand;  till he returns or calls me home,  here in the power of Christ I'll stand! |
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Be safe in the days ahead, and we pray that we will soon be able to meet as one.

And may the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit reast and abide with each and every one of us this day and for evermore.

Amen