

31st January 2021 10 am Strengthening Grace

Service led by Andrew Attwood, who also interviews Steve & Ruth Sutton about faith and ill health, Talk by Val Whiteman, Intercessions by Simone Royle.

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Welcome

[Andrew:] Good morning. Good to see you. Nice to see you, Val.

[Val:] Hi Andrew, are you all right.

[Andrew:] I'm fine. How you doing, Simone?

[Simone:] Good thank you.

[Andrew:] Lovely to see you. I hope you're all doing well. It's not raining today.

[Simone:] It's beautiful.

[Andrew:] I know. Yesterday was a bit miserable, wasn't it? But you guys, are you getting any fresh air later?

[Val:] Yeah, definitely.

[Andrew:] Good. I'm presuming, Simone, it'll be dog-walking later on.

[Simone:] Yeah, it will be, but it's my father-in-law's birthday as well so it's a family do.

[Andrew:] Okay, right. Lovely. Good.

Well, I'll be seeing Val, who's speaking later, and Simone, who's praying later, so I'll see you later on. Good to see you.

Notices

I'll just do a few notices before we begin the remainder of the service. So let's see if I can share some points with you.

- Just a reminder that there's activities and things for children to engage with during this time, if that's any help to you. Thank you, Denise, for putting those together.
- Later on at 6:30 today there will be a Churches Together in Kenilworth Taizé service. It's a joint service that's available to all the churches in the town, and that's at 6:30 not 6pm. So do make a point of looking at the newsletter for the link for that, and that will help you engage with that.
- Just a note that you will probably be aware of. We heard the sad news last week that Pat Briffa, Colin Briffa's wife, unexpectedly sadly died last week. It was on the 24th of January that she passed away. And at this time, simultaneous to this service, Knights Meadow church, where Colin and Pat were for many, many years, they're holding a memorial service. So I just wanted to ask Warwick Road folks to keep Knights Meadow and the Briffa family in your prayers at this time. That was sad and unexpected, so keep that in your thoughts and prayers.

So that's all the notices for now.

Introduction: How Heavy A Load Are You Carrying?

Let me just see if we can prepare our hearts now for the theme of this service. We have been exploring a reasonably short series focused on grace in recent weeks. We talked about how God's grace was undeserved, and I spoke about Barabbas. Then we had a talk that related to God saving us and adopting us. And more recently, we talked about the transforming effect of grace. Today, Val will be speaking to us about the strengthening effect of grace in our lives. And as a way of preparing us for that particular theme, I wanted to put some ideas in your head in preparation for our worship, and for our reflection.

The question I wanted to ask you this morning is this: what are you carrying these days? What are you carrying?

If I was to grab hold of this, this is a kind of an ordinary shopping bag, and to me a shopping bag kind-of illustrates the day-to-day things that we have to carry, not too heavy: things we pick up, things we put down. Is that the nature of what you carry these days?



Or maybe, maybe you're carrying something a bit more weighty. This is a backpack. Maybe when you get up in the mornings, you feel that you've got stuff on your shoulders that you know is there, and it probably makes you a little weary by the end of the day. Are you wearing something that's kind of always there, that you carry, maybe inside you that you carry, something a bit heavier than just day-to-day stuff.



Or maybe, maybe you're carrying something even heavier. Do you ever get out of the bed in the morning and you think "I can't move because of what I'm carrying": big things, really heavy things, things that really weigh you down in your spirit, things that can sometimes make you feel like you can't get out of bed. What are you carrying?



I just wanted to begin with a word of prayer. As we come to God with the many things that we carry, small to medium to big, let's reflect for a moment and just pray.

Father God, we come to You as we are. We thank You that You are a God of mercy, and a God of grace, and I want to pray Lord, that in this time that we have together, that You will help us to be honest with You about what weighs us down, about the trials and hardships of our lives. We want to thank You, God, that You are gracious to us. And we pray that during this service we would be made more aware of the grace that is available to help us with the many things that we carry. In Jesus' name, amen.

We're going to have two worship songs now, followed by a really moving interview I did with Ruth and Steve Sutton earlier this week. So we're going to have some worship, followed by an interview.

1st Song: 10,000 Reasons

Chorus:

Bless The Lord, O my soul,
O my soul,
Worship His holy name;
Sing like never before,
O my soul,
I'll worship Your holy name.

1. The sun comes up,
It's a new day dawning;
It's time to sing Your song again.
Whatever may pass
And whatever lies before me
Let me be singing
When the evening comes.

Chorus

2. You're rich in love
And You're slow to anger;
Your name is great
And Your heart is kind.
For all Your goodness
I will keep on singing
Ten thousand reasons
For my heart to find.

Chorus

3. And on that day
When my strength is failing,
The end draws near
And my time has come,
Still my soul will
Sing Your praise unending
Ten thousand years
And then forevermore

Chorus x 2

Yes, I'll worship Your holy name,
Lord, I'll worship Your holy name.

2nd Song: You Alone Can Rescue

1. Who, oh Lord, could save themselves
Their own soul could heal?
Our shame was deeper than the sea
Your grace is deeper still

Repeat verse 1

Chorus:

You alone can rescue, You alone can save
You alone can lift us from the grave
You came down to find us, led us out of death
To You alone belongs the highest praise

2. You, oh Lord, have made a way
The great divide You heal
For when our hearts were far away
Your love went further still
Yes, your love goes further still

Chorus

Bridge:

We lift up our eyes, lift up our eyes
You're the Giver of Life

Repeat bridge three times

Chorus

Interview with Steve and Ruth Sutton: Living with MS in Faith

[Andrew:] Thank you very much for being available for these questions I wanted to ask you, and I just wondered if, for a first question, you might set the scene in describing the beginning of your story with regards to long term, ongoing illness?

[Steve:] It started a year after we got married, so that's 43 years ago. And Ruth just went lame, in just one leg. We didn't know what it was. So you went to the doctor.

[Ruth:] Yes.

[Steve:] And he gave you a course of injections into your thigh.

[Ruth:] Yes.

[Steve:] And after about three weeks, it cleared up. And then a couple years, or maybe 20 months later, it started again, and so you went to the doctor, again, to give you a course of injections. And after three weeks, you were back at work again. And then a couple of years later, it started again. So we went to a specialist. And he examined Ruth, but he didn't tell us what the problem was. It was only when we moved house, and we wanted to start a family. We'd moved to a different area, and I thought, "Well, I'd better get life insurance on Ruth, in case things don't work out the way we think it should do." And I couldn't get life insurance! And the insurance agent was a friend of my brother's. And he said, "Look, I can't tell you, you have to go and see your doctor." So we went to our doctor, who was a Christian doctor at that point, and he told us that it was MS.

[Andrew:] Wow.

[Steve:] And that's how we found out.

[Andrew:] So given that that was a gradual discovery, in what ways has it affected the both of you over the years, in what ways has the illness affected you as a couple, you as individuals?

[Steve:] The type of MS is known as 'RR' which is 'relapsing remitting' MS, it was at that point, which means it comes and goes. It's actually quite faith-destroying as you pray and it goes and then it comes back again. But the remissions get shorter and shorter and it doesn't fully clear.

[Ruth:] Yes.

[Steve:] So it's starting from a higher base level, as it were. So when it hits again, it's worse every time until it becomes 'secondary progressive' where there are no gaps, there's no remission at all, it's just a progressive disability which is where you're at now.

[Ruth:] That's where I am at now.

[Andrew:] So Ruth, I mean just in terms of how this has affected you, what kind of things has it done in terms of limiting you or made things hard? What kind of things come to mind as to how it's been for you?

[Ruth:] I spend a lot of time thinking about holidays that we've had and I think on the positive to keep me ... so, yes.

[Steve:] This type of MS has actually attacked her brain as well, it's destroyed parts of her brain, and so she finds it difficult now to maintain things and to especially stay attentive and retain things.

[Andrew:] So, given that that's very debilitating for obviously a long time, where does faith fit into this for you? How has faith helped or in what ways have you journeyed with God through this situation?

[Ruth:] Well, we've taken to God.

[Steve:] We pray about it. Having God with us, day to day, every day, in everyday tasks, really, because everything becomes a bit of a problem then. And finding encouragement from reading the Bible together, praying together and that's really our mainstay, is our reading together. It does two things. It helps you in your reading as you forget words.

[Andrew:] Right.

[Steve:] So it's really our mainstay, as I said, and knowing we can ask Him for anything at any time. Ask His help. So it's fabulous, really, isn't it? I mean, let's face it.

[Ruth:] We have help from St. John's.

We have help from...

[Andrew:] from the church?

[Ruth:] Yeah, yeah.

[Steve:] Yes, when we get together, then friends stimulate you, don't they?

[Ruth:] Definitely,

[Steve:] Which we do miss during lockdown, that stimulation of time.

[Andrew:] And what about, what about yourself, Steve, what sustains you, faith-wise? Obviously, you play a role as a husband and carer, to some extent, with Ruth. What sustains you faith-wise?

[Steve:] It is that personal walk, that closeness, that being able to, you know, when things are really bad, I'll go upstairs and pour it all out before the Lord. And then I'll come down and we'll talk it over. And He shows us really what the way ahead is, whether it needs more effort, because Ruth's finding that she can't do something that she could do last week. Sometimes it needs more effort, and a bit more attention given to it. Other times it needs life adjustment. And so we have to alter things in how we live in order to actually cope with the situation.

[Andrew:] Okay, so it sounds like you both are having to continuously learn and, presumably learning as Christians as you go?

[Ruth:] Yes, very much so.

[Steve:] Yes, very much so, very much so. It really is. I don't know how we would have managed without a deep faith and trust in Jesus as Saviour and God's love for us. I really don't know how we would manage ...

[Andrew:] Okay.

[Steve:] ... with all that's gone on, He's always there. I mean, you don't always want and like what is going on. But He helps us make the most of it, the best of it.

[Ruth:] Yeah.

[Andrew:] Good.

[Steve:] But I think the main secret, it's our trust in God. But facing every difficulty with humour,

[Andrew:] Right

[Ruth:] Yes.

[Steve:] We laugh a lot. We have a happy home. And you have to just laugh at when things go wrong.

[Andrew:] Okay.

[Steve:] Really, that's a big thing we've learned. Treat everything with humour, because God loves us, even though Ruth hasn't been healed yet, and we've prayed for healing many times, it's just the knowledge that He loves and cares for us. There's an old song which I looked up recently, and the chorus words are this and it's really our testimony, isn't it?

[Ruth:] Yes.

[Steve:] The chorus words go, "Some through the waters, some through the flood, some through the fire, but all through the Blood. Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song in the night season and all the day long."¹ And we literally start our day singing. We do. We play a little game. We start each day with the alphabet, with one of the letters from the alphabet, and the task is to think of the words of a hymn, a verse or a chorus, and sing it through. And that's how we start our day. And each day, we take a different letter. So we start our day, singing, praising, and that's a real help to start.

[Andrew:] Look, it's been lovely to talk with you. I'm really impressed. Thank you very much for answering my questions. Okay?

[Steve:] Our pleasure.

Talk: Strengthening Grace

[Val Whiteman:]

I watched that before, and I find it unbearably moving. I mean, how wonderful that the testimony is that Jesus is with them, always. So I'd like a moment of quiet while we think about what Ruth and Steve said, before I start to talk.

1 God Leads Us Along – by George A. Young, 1903. https://library.timelesstruths.org/music/God_Leads_Us_Along/

Father God, thank You so much for Ruth and Steve. Thank You for the testimony that You are with them always, even through the darkest times. And we pray that this may continue. We may not understand why You don't heal, because we probably would. But we pray for Your faith and Your understanding and Your trust and Your love, for them and for all of us. Amen.

So I feel like kind-of 'follow that'! Last week, we heard about sanctifying grace from Andrew and that's how to live more like Jesus. And this, as Andrew says, the last one in the series, will overlap it a little and continue it. It's, to remind you, 'strengthening grace', the power to live for God even in suffering and in trouble. So, remember, Andrew's challenged us to think about what we might be carrying at the moment on our own, without God. So can you hang on to that thought for a while until I finish.

I want to look back a little at what grace means. I didn't realise that it came from the Hebrew word which describes God's choosing of His people through the covenants in the Old Testament, the undeserved choice of the Israelites, out of all the other people that God could have chosen. They didn't deserve it, it was His choice. In the New Testament, in the New Covenant, and we remember grace is, traditionally, God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Without grace, we can't enter into contact with God at all, we're justified through grace in Jesus. And we need to accept that nothing we can do will enable us to be holy enough to come into His presence, but thank God, Christ did it all by His death on the Cross. And we, because we love Him, accept that sacrifice, and therefore we are free to be the people we should be. But that's not where it ends. Grace, if it's grace at all, must continue throughout our Christian life. You don't get a kind of one-off fix when you become a Christian, you are justified by faith. And then you are sanctified by that grace, that God gives us, the grace that makes us grow more and more, if we live with it, like Jesus. So the reading we've got today is from 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. And I'm just going to read it from *The Message*, which I know is a paraphrase, but I just wanted the immediacy of Paul's words, and not that sort of 'holiness' which surrounds more careful translations. So Paul is talking to the Corinthians who, it is fair to say, have annoyed him. So, over to Andrew.

[Andrew:]

Thank you, Val. So this is 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. From version/translation, *The Message*

1-5 You've forced me to talk this way, and I do it against my better judgment. But now that we're at it, I may as well bring up the matter of visions and revelations that God gave me. For instance, I know a man who, fourteen years ago, was seized by Christ and swept in ecstasy to the heights of heaven. I really don't know if this took place in the body or out of it; only God knows. I also know that this man was hijacked into paradise—again, whether in or out of the body, I don't know; God knows. There he heard the unspeakable spoken, but was forbidden to tell what he heard. This is the man I want to talk about. But about myself, I'm not saying another word apart from the humiliations.

6 If I had a mind to brag a little, I could probably do it without looking ridiculous, and I'd still be speaking plain truth all the way. But I'll spare you. I don't want anyone imagining me as anything other than the fool you'd encounter if you saw me on the street or heard me talk.

7-10 Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me,

My grace is enough; it's all you need.

My strength comes into its own in your weakness.

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

This is the word of the Lord.

[Val Whiteman:]

Before I start, I need to say that Hamish has kindly put some background notes² on Corinthians on the church website for you to look at if you want more detail, because I'm not going to have time to do much in the way of history of the church and so on. So if you're interested, have a look.

You heard from Steve and Ruth what it's like to live in this strengthening grace. It's a long haul, and not one we enter lightly. And I'm finding this talk really hard, because if I'm not careful, it comes across as glib, which is the last thing I want. I think if you want to experience this strengthening grace, you have to live it over a lifetime, as Ruth and Steven have had to. I like Eugene Peterson's title of his book on the Psalms, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, which says it all.

Paul's really concerned for the Christians at Corinth because false teachers have tried to show them shortcuts to grace, which means that Christians can control their life and not Christ. If you're like me, it's something you have to learn daily, that Jesus is Lord and not me. Too often, I try to take back control and live my life in my own strength. Not even Paul tried that and succeeded.

Paul talks about relying on God in the terrible difficulties he faces. When he arrived in Corinth, he felt worn out from all the terrible things that had happened before. He felt he could not go on. Yet God says to him that he should not worry, that there are people in Corinth who will listen, he won't be harmed, so he relies on God for the strength to go on, and the result is the Christian church. There's still a lingering feeling that if we follow Christ, bad things shouldn't happen to us, and it's this that Paul attacks. He himself has suffered for the Gospel. He says in 2 Corinthians 11,

23-27 I've worked much harder, been jailed more often, beaten up more times than I can count, and at death's door time after time. I've been flogged five times with the Jews' thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummelled with rocks once. I've been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard travelling year in and year out, I've had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I've been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers. I've known drudgery and hard labour, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather.

When you speak truth to power, you tend to get into trouble. We have a slightly different problem in this country: we tend to be ignored to death. We're irrelevant and people don't listen when we try to tell them the danger or the truth of the Gospel. And that still hurts; it can still lead to rejection and damaged careers. But it's not surprising, and God is still with us, if we are obedient to His Word.

2 By Val

Worse and more problematic for us is when illness or death comes to us or those we love. In Job 5, verse 7, it says³, "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards," and Job should know. As followers of Jesus, we're not exempt from the normal sadnesses of life. One thing that happens to all of us, sooner or later, is death, and for the Christian, although there is the great hope of salvation, there is still grief. Jesus Himself showed that grief as He mourned for His friend Lazarus. In John 11, verse 35, at the graveside it says, "Jesus wept," even though He knew that the sorrow was not going to last. We're allowed to be sad, when someone we love is no longer there. Sorrow and mourning are a part of life, Christian or atheist. We sorrow for the death of Pat Briffa, and we don't understand why she died when she did. I'm not going to speculate; all I'm going to do is to mourn with the family and friends. Again, don't let people tell you how you should react. How hurtful is that? I remember that when the great and wise Christian saint David Watson was dying of cancer, 'helpful' people said he was not healed because he did not have enough faith. What arrogance.

Listen to what Paul says about the thorn he had, this handicap, whatever it was, and I don't want to speculate in what it was, because it was obviously something that hindered him greatly, and maybe hindered him in his ministry. He says that he prayed for it to be removed three times and it wasn't. Why does a loving God let us suffer? Is that the wrong question to ask? I think so. When we suffer, Paul says, God is still with us, and he turns that suffering to joy, as Steve and Ruth have said, and into fruitful ministry, if we let it.

So what do we do if things happen to us or those we love, and we can't understand why? Of course, we pray for healing, or for a change in circumstances. But if they don't change, and the healing doesn't happen, then Paul says something absolutely amazing. "The weaker I get, the stronger I become," or in the NIV, "For when I am weak, then I am strong."⁴ God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."⁵

I was reading the other day in the newspaper about 'resilience', that modern virtue, which I'm assuming is much the same as perseverance. The writer said that in the West, we've largely lost our resilience, because our expectation is that we will be well and strong (until we're not). Health is the default position. It's the same idea which sees all disability as something defective that needs to be corrected, so disabled people are seen as somehow less than the able-bodied. Again, I don't know whether you saw that very moving documentary the other week. If things happen to us which are less than ideal, we feel failures, because we feel we should be well and happy. I think any other century would correct that feeling pretty well.

Certainly, Paul would. Not because he is masochistic or seeks out painful experience, but because he knows that they happen to all of us. If we as Christians don't invest in this strengthening grace, keep on being sanctified by the love and the presence of God to help us when things get hard, then it's very difficult for us to become mature at all.

I know, it's a balance. Please don't think I'm advocating some sort of flagellation. The early church were really wise when they said if you go out of your way to court martyrdom, you aren't a martyr. Paul says in Philippians, chapter 4⁶,

12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in

3 [NKJV]

4 From 2 Corinthians 12:10 [NIVUK 2011]

5 From 2 Corinthians 12:9 [NIVUK 2011]

6 NIVUK 2011

plenty or in want.

And how does he do that?

13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

And it's a similar thing to what he's saying here. If we can rely on God and His grace, He is sufficient to meet all the circumstances we find ourselves in. We need to practice the resilience or the perseverance which means that we rely on Him. And it has to be by practice. When you are justified by grace to start off with, then you know that you can come into the presence of God, you can come in safely, regularly, frequently into this beyond-holy, beyond-loving God that we know, and that He will live within us. But it doesn't count for anything, if we then take back ourselves and say, "Well, thank you very much for justifying grace, now I can cope on my own." The point is, to learn that we continue to rely on Him, day by day, hour by hour and second by second. It takes a long time to grow faith. We shouldn't feel unhappy if sometimes we fall away, because God will always bring us back, have the means to enable us to come back into His presence. In Romans 5⁷, Paul develops this much further. (This is a bit of a long quote, so you might like to look it up.)

1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith,

(that justified bit)

we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2** through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

(And then comes the next bit.)

3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; **4** perseverance, character; and character, hope. **5** And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Perseverance isn't an exciting virtue. It's by its nature long-lasting. It isn't showy. It's very hard in today's world, where we are expected to have instant success, to think about years and years of quiet faith in God. But that's what we're called to. Paul looks at grace as God gives it and as we receive it. God's grace is enough for us if we rest in Him. Look at the sacrifice of Jesus. The pain and suffering He carried for us means that there is nowhere where we can say, "So where was God in this?" because Jesus had already stood in the place of injustice, ill treatment, a shameful death. And for us to understand this takes perseverance and faith from *us*, a daily reassertion that Jesus is Lord for *us* in our lives.

So who do you put your trust in? In yourself? In the exciting ministers who show you shortcuts to grace? Or in the Pauls, who patiently explain that faith in Jesus is all you need. I think today that when we're struggling with so many changes and so much sorrow, that this is the grace we need, strengthening grace, which deepens our reliance on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. We need to encourage one another to continue in this grace, which Paul says, and experienced also, is all-sufficient. In fact, we do great things in faith, because we have no strength of our own in which to do anything. Where we are at the end of our tether is where God can begin. God's strength is much greater than ours and His purpose much clearer. So I'd like to end with encouragement for us all to continue in this grace.

Prayerful Responses

[Val Whiteman:]

I'd like to start a time of response by looking where we are. This is the time to think of what you're carrying instead of giving it to God. In a minute, I'm going to read Psalm 130, which is one of the Psalms of Ascents that the Israelites recited as they went up to Jerusalem each year. And it's probably the darkest of them, and it expresses the despair that people feel. Remember, we're allowed to give the darkness to God. So as we think more about relying on God, and less on us, let's think about where we are. The Psalm ends with the knowledge that God will redeem Israel, and you'd like to put in that we stand beyond that redemption in Christ already. So a moment and then I'm going to read the psalm again in The Message.

Help, GOD—I've hit rock bottom!
Master, hear my cry for help!
Listen hard! Open your ears!
Listen to my cries for mercy.
If you, GOD, kept records on wrongdoings,
who would stand a chance?
As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit,
and that's why you're worshipped.
I pray to GOD—my life a prayer—
and wait for what he'll say and do.
My life's on the line before God, my Lord,
waiting and watching till morning,
waiting and watching till morning.
O Israel, wait and watch for GOD—
with GOD's arrival comes love,
with GOD's arrival comes generous redemption.
No doubt about it—he'll redeem Israel,
buy back Israel from captivity to sin.

[Andrew Attwood:]

So let's continue in a moment of quiet. Let's be still and wait on the Lord.

Come, Holy Spirit, and meet us where we are.

Bring to God what you're carrying.

When we are at the end of our tether is where God can begin.

So let Him begin in this moment.

Lord God, we do not pray, not all the time anyway, for instant relief, but
Lord, I do pray for strengthening grace in our circumstances.

Would you be with us as we go through trials and difficulties?

Would you make your presence felt?

Would you pour out grace to help us where we are?

And Lord, would you help us to know You better in this place of hardship and suffering?

Would you help us to become mature, not resisting hardship, or trials, but receiving them as an opportunity to know you better?

Help us to say 'yes', Lord, to the many things that come our way including things in our heart.

And Lord, we thank you again for the witness of people like Ruth and Steve, who model for us the availability of strengthening grace, in suffering. We pray that we too will be welcomed into that ministry and that witness, so that we can become mature in grace. Amen.

Intercessions

I'm going to hand over to Simone now, who is going to lead us in some more prayers.

[Simone Royle:]

Mighty God, Heavenly Father, we come to You now in the name of Jesus. We are awed by Your grace. We thank You for Your servants, for the encouragement that they bring to us, and for their boldness in sharing the Good News of the Gospel, Lord. We thank You for the life of Pat Briffa. We thank You for all the people who she touched in her life, and we pray that You comfort them now in their grief. We pray for the service at Knights Meadow where they remember her. And we thank You, God, for all the servants who've, like Andrew was saying, who witness to us like Ruth and Steve, and we thank You for that witness, and thank You for the opportunity we have to also be witnesses in our lives.

Lord, we pray now for a world, a world that is broken, but into which You pour out Your light. And we pray for all the challenges that happened this week with vaccination distribution. And we pray that vaccination distribution be smooth and easy across the whole of the UK, across the EU, and that the distribution also go across the whole world. Thank You, Mighty God, that this conflict of interest that was there at the start of the week, between the EU vaccine supply and Northern Ireland, thank You that that seems to have been resolved, and the conflict didn't grow. We pray for Your peace in the EU and the ironing out of the vaccine supply issues in the EU. We pray that no country loses out with a vaccine, no country is left behind in the fight against COVID, mighty God, and thank You for all the companies working flat out around the clock, some of which not even for profit, to supply vaccines and pull the world out of this terrible pandemic, Lord. Thank You for those companies and we pray for smooth workings as an ironing out of issues there. Thank You for the success of the vaccine programme so far in Israel and the UK, and Lord, we pray that the success continue and become worldwide, as comprehensive and as swift in poorer nations as it is in the richer nations, and that there be generosity and compassion from the richer nations such as the us, the UK, to those nations that are not so wealthy, Lord, and we thank You that we have this opportunity to share our wealth and our resources with the world, and we pray just for compassion, and a worldwide end for this disease.

Father, we think now of our NHS staff, so tired, working in such incredibly difficult situations right now, and seeing people so very, very sick. And we pray for them as they work in these harrowing situations, that You encourage them. And we pray for Your servants in the NHS, that they bring light to the wards. We pray that You walk with them, and just that Your Holy Spirit bring peace to those wards, Lord. We pray that You take away fear, specifically fear for those people who can't breathe, who can't get the air they need right now because of COVID. How very terrifying that situation might be, and I pray that You put Your hand on their chests and their hearts, and You take away their fear, Lord God.

In this time so many people are struggling with sleep. I've heard, from nightmares to just completely turned around sleep. Lord, I pray I bring the sleep of this nation to You. I pray for people to be able to get the sleep and the rest they need, and I pray for wisdom with parents as well especially of teenagers who might have completely turned around clock times. Lord I pray, I pray for healing on sleep.

Thank You, God, so much we praise Your name for the online provision that there is for people to be able to work online, to be able to learn online. And we thank You for that, Lord, and we pray also that this provision be something which is for everyone, that no one, especially I'm thinking of children, Lord God, that there be no children who are left out because they don't have access to the internet. Lord, let no one be left behind in this time.

Mighty God, it's so beautiful outside. This morning it was really crisp, the frost everywhere. And the snow was gorgeous. We turn our minds now to those who are homeless and on the streets. As much as it is joyful for sledging, the snow and the cold is so difficult for them, Lord. So Father, we pray that homeless people get shelter in this time and we praise Your name for all the people who have gone out and been generous, who provide tents for the homeless. We praise Your name for the initiative which was 'everyone in' where the hotels last lockdown opened their doors and brought in homeless people. And we thank You for hotels that have kept the scheme running, like the Prince Rupert Hotel in Shrewsbury. Father, we praise Your name for those hotels and we pray for their wisdom as they continue to provide provision, and we pray also for wisdom as it comes time for them to end that provision, that all these homeless people that have been brought into these lovely warm hotels are not then just thrown back out into the streets. We pray for homes for them, Lord God. And right now, in this moment, Lord, we pray that the homeless people on our streets here in the UK and across the world, but specifically here in the UK, that they find warmth. And Father, please speak to us if there is some provision or some way that You're calling us to be a part of that experience, Lord, we pray that You put that clearly on our hearts, we know how to go about serving, and helping there, Lord God.

Finally we bring to You the really awful and violent situation in the Central African Republic. Mighty God, we pray for stability and safety there. Safe passage for those who are fleeing violence, but most of all that that violence stops. Pray for peace in that nation. Father God, please strengthen, this is a nation that has historically been largely Christian. We pray for our sisters and brothers in Christ in the Central African Republic. We pray that You strengthen them. And we thank You Lord, that Your strength moves in our weakness, so we pray for our brothers and sisters there. And we thank You that Your strength is with them now. And we pray for Your mighty power and intercession in their lives. Keep them safe, Lord God. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Blessing

[Andrew:]

Amen. Thank you, Simone. Thank you very much. This has been a very moving service to be part of. I don't know how you've responded to this, watching, listening, but from the story of the Suttons' to Val's very strong and resonant talk, to Simone's heartfelt praying, it's touched me, it really has. So thank you, guys, for all the different contributions - really helpful. What I would want to encourage you to do, in the light of today, is to seek God. As you've heard many times, seek God for His strength and grace. But also, if you're able to safely talk with other Christians, maybe pray for each other, particularly if you're carrying something that is hard for you to carry alone.

So I'm just going to bless you in a moment. We will finish with a final song. But let me finish with a simple word of blessing as we end.

Jesus, like Val mentioned, it said in John's gospel that you wept at the graveside of Lazarus, your friend. So you know how we feel. I pray, Jesus, that You would bless all of us in these coming days with a close knowledge of your care and provision in times of difficulty and pressure. I pray, Lord Jesus, that You would bless us this week with first-hand experience of your grace, when we are under pressure. And we pray that we would have the

privilege of honouring You with good witnessing lives as we shine out in response to the grace that we have received. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

So we finish now. God bless you.

3rd Song: Great Is Thy Faithfulness

1. Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with Thee,
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not,
As Thou hast been, Thou forever wilt be.

Chorus:

- Great is Thy faithfulness!
Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!
2. Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above;
Join with all nature in manifold witness,
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.
 3. Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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Great is Thy Faithfulness – by Thomas Chisholm 1866–1960 with music composed by William M. Runyan 1870–1957