

**Winchester, Eastleigh & Romsey Circuit
SERVICE AT HOME – Sunday 9th July 2023**

Prepared by Revd Tim Searle

Preparation

As we prepare to worship God may we still our minds and calm our hearts. May we place the weight of our burdens squarely on the yoke of Jesus, not to dismiss or discard them, but to share them. For his burden is light and his yoke easy. He is gentle and humble in heart; in him we find rest for our souls.

Pause

Call to Worship

Almighty God, we gather in your name
and bring ourselves before you:

for your yoke is easy and your burden is light.

When we are heavy of heart,
and the pressures of life push us down,
we bring ourselves before you:

for your yoke is easy and your burden is light.

When we are in need of rest,
tired from the activities of the past week,
we bring ourselves before you:

for your yoke is easy and your burden is light.

Jesus, gentle, humble Lord,
we leave behind that which holds us back,
we devote ourselves to the wonder of your love:
for your yoke is easy and your burden is light.

Listen, Read, Pray or Sing Along

Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us (StF 594)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKsbd5UqKkc>

Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us,
you are one with us, Mary's Son;
cleansing our souls from all their sin,
pouring your love and goodness in;
Jesus our love for you we sing,
living Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ, now and every day,
teach us how to pray, Son of God.
You have commanded us to do
this, in remembrance, Lord, of you;
into our lives your power breaks through,
living Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us,
born as one of us, Mary's Son;
led out to die on Calvary,
risen from death to set us free;
living Lord Jesus, help us see
you are Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ, we would come to you,
live our lives for you, Son of God.
All your commands we know are true;
your many gifts will make us new;
into our lives your power breaks through,
living Lord.

Patrick Appleford (b. 1925)

A Prayer of Approach

Generous God, we come before you in worship
and hope to be welcomed.

We open our lives to you and welcome your
life-giving Spirit once again.

Come among us:

open our hearts and minds this day.
Make us ready to receive your Word,
and ready to receive all whom you love and
welcome.

For in doing so we gain a reward more valuable
than any this world can offer:
the reward of better knowing you
and our fellow human beings.

A Prayer of Confession

Almighty God,
when we do not understand why we do
the things we do.

When we speak out of spite and not in love.
When we act out of anger and not in mercy:
forgive us.

In Christ there is freedom: **set us free!**

When pride overcomes humility.
When jealousy is more important than
generosity,
When fear prevents us from
placing our trust in you:
forgive us.

In Christ there is freedom: **set us free!**

Lord, by your Spirit forgive us our sins
and transform us by the perfect law of freedom.
Set us free to walk in your way
and seek out your truth, now and always. **Amen.**

Read Song of Solomon 2. 8 – 13

Read Matthew 11. 25 – 30

Listen, Read, Pray or Sing Along

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me (StF 395)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYfzcYohWZg>

Spirit of the living God,
fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the living God,
fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mould me,
fill me, use me.

Spirit of the living God,
fall afresh on me.

Daniel Iverson (1890-1977)

Reflection

It's good to revisit the Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs as it styles itself) from time to time. A short book in the Hebrew Scriptures it makes up one of the five 'scrolls' in the writings (*ketubim*) along with Ruth, Esther, Lamentations and Ecclesiastes. The song includes no direct mention of God and therefore relies on the connections we might make between the kind of love being expressed, and what that might say about God's love for us.

The section we've read is entitled 'Springtime Rhapsody' and is awash with lyrical phrases (it is a song after all) expressing the pining of one lover for another and their desire to be reunited. Though this section is one of the more toned-down ones, the book as a whole is a clear example of biblical erotica. It's bursting with romance, poetic flair and more than a few double entendres!

It's nice, from time-to-time, to be reminded of our passionate sides. Those who have felt the

keen edge of love's touch will empathise with the characters in the song. To be 'drunk' on love is a somewhat euphoric experience. It is all consuming, pushing everything else to the side, even rationality itself. To be so loved and cherished by the object of one's own affection can make you feel ten feet tall, able to stride the world with confident ebullience.

It is a reminder that, as well as being thoughtful, prayerful, and faithful in our relationship with God, we should also embrace our passion for God. We don't often associate the kind of language we find in 'the song' with our walk with God, but perhaps we should. Do we have a hungry desire to know God more fully, spend time with God more intentionally, and to bask, yes bask(!) in that closeness we experience in God's loving arms?

I guess the problem, for most of us, is that we know the transitory nature of human, romantic love. It's intoxicating to feel in love, to feel special, but that soon wears off as a couple, if they stay together, work out what it is to love one another (or sometimes just coexist) on a grander scale. Furthermore, there are plenty of people who have chosen to remain or become single for who the language of *coupling* has been consciously (if not always happily) resisted. The good news is that all of us, regardless of our circumstances, can express our deep love and passion for God, and through that find understanding, acceptance and reassurance that transcends all else.

And furthermore, unlike the human experience of being 'in love', being in a deep, intimate relationship with God does not have to be transitory. It is a relationship that can be shared with others and can be accessed no matter what stage of life you are at. It requires no special abilities or towering physical attributes. You don't have to be able to articulate yourself as a poet or scholar; you just have to be yourself, and that includes being yourself in your brokenness.

When Jesus was thanking his Father in Matthew 11, he concluded the section with these words:

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’

I’m going to make a (possibly) dangerous assumption here and assert that most of you reading this reflection feel weary and are carrying heavy burdens, rather than flying high on the winds of romantic love. What Jesus was acknowledging here is the brokenness we all, at times, feel in our lives. That ‘brokenness’ can manifest in many ways. It can be feeling physically broken through things like exhaustion or the effects of aging. It can be feeling mentally broken through grief, lost love, and fear of the future. It can be brokenness brought about by shame or regret or feelings of what might have been.

In a way, Jesus words here could be seen as the antithesis of the heights depicted in the song. Here, Jesus addresses the lows of life. Instead of using flora, fauna, food, and drink to represent romantic and sexual desire, Jesus uses agricultural metaphors to describe the support that can be found in him, and through him, the Father. The yoke Jesus is referring to is the wooden crosspiece that wedded two animals together to either pull a cart or plough a field. The inference is clear. Jesus is saying, ‘Share the load with me’, ‘allow me to help you with your burdens’, ‘don’t feel you have to do this alone’, ‘take on my yoke and I will walk alongside you’.

Though these readings might appear quite awkward bedfellows (pun intended) there is something to be said for appreciating the presence of God in all aspects of our lives, both the ebb, and the flow. There is something to be said for rapturous feelings of love, and for how this might inspire us to have a deeper and more connected relationship with God. It asks us questions like: do we have a passion for being with God, do we crave time in God’s presence, and is God the object of our life’s works and pursuits? Yet at the same time, it shows us that God is equally present in the trials and tribulations we face.

When hardship, or disappointment, or just the sheer passage of time cools our inflamed passions and dims our desire, God, in Christ through the Spirit, still desires intimacy and closeness and connection with us. The closeness of one who would wed him or herself alongside us as a fellow animal is yoked to another. The idea being that they ‘pull together and share the load’.

So, revel in the heights of holy passion that the song alludes to. Don’t imagine that because the song may not reflect your life at the moment, that you’re excluded from expressing your passion for God, your yearning, and your desire for closeness with Abba. And don’t begrudge those whose hearts and bodies are alive with the music of the song. Instead, rejoice in demonstrations of holy love, giving thanks for the source and saviour of that love. And be kind to yourselves, just as the Lord Jesus embraces us with his kindness. Don’t struggle on alone when the invitation for a shared yoke is on offer. I get the impression that trying to pull something by yourself when the burden should be shared is no yoke 😊

Come, all of you, to God once again. Whether you’re soaring high, or weary and carrying heavy burdens. God does not differentiate. God simply desires relationship with you, relationship that is connected and intentional and life-giving.

Source, Saviour, Sustainer, be our way, our truth, our life. Amen.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Holy God,
Thank you for your righteous rule in our lives.
That mercy triumphs over judgement,
that compassion overcomes anger,
and that those who fall are lifted up.

Use us, Gracious God,
as instruments of your grace,
that the hungry may be fed,
the thirsty, filled,
and the broken, remade.

Pause

As a community of faith,
through the strength we give each other in Christ,
we pray for our world and all those who suffer.

We pray for those who have no community or
sense of belonging, feeling isolated and alone.

We pray for those who carry burdens, where lives
are disturbed by the past, and by guilt.

We pray for those who shoulder responsibility,
those in government and positions of power.

We pray for those lost in the complexity of
modern living, struggling to navigate change.

Pause

Lamb of God,
we ask that you hold in your arms all who are sick
or sorrowful this day ...

Silence

We ask your comfort for all those who mourn,
whether recently bereaved or reliving deep
sorrow from the past ...

Silence

Life-giving Spirit,
enable us to be your holy people,
visible to all by our love and joy,
our peace and patience,
our kindness and generosity,
our faithfulness and compassion.
May we, like you, be gentle and humble in heart,
finding rest for our souls in the ease of your yoke.

We bring all our prayers together by praying the
prayer Jesus taught us ...

The Lord's Prayer

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.

Listen, Read, Pray or Sing Along

Come, let us sing of a wonderful love (StF 443)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_K31fzpkLE

Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,
tender and true;
out of the heart of the Father above,
streaming to me and to you:
wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,
joyfully came;
came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,
sharing their sorrow and shame;
seeking the lost,
saving, redeeming at measureless cost.

Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;
why do they roam?
Love only waits to forgive and forget;
home, weary wanderer, home!
Wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,
come and abide,
lifting my life till it rises above
envy and falsehood and pride;
seeking to be
lowly and humble, a learner of thee.

Robert Walmsley (1831 – 1905)

Dismissal and Blessing

Go and tell:

for God is gracious and merciful and full of love.

Go and live:

for God's compassion embraces us all.

Go and give thanks:

for God is faithful and walks with us always.

And the blessing of God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
guard you and guide you,
preserve and protect you,
this day, and for ever more. **Amen.**

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