

Apart but Together Worship - Hornsea URC Sunday 17th May - For the Beauty of the Earth: verse 5

Good morning, and welcome to our 'Apart but Together Worship.' **The music and words of all the worship songs can be found by following the [blue YouTube links](#).**

Call to worship:

Come and worship the living God – and the Saviour of the world.

Come and worship the one who died – and was raised again.

Come and worship the Spirit who renews and empowers us to be God's people and to offer him our thanks, our praise and our worship. Amen

In week one of our current Sunday morning service series, Jean gave us some very helpful background information about the context from which the hymn 'For the beauty of the earth' was written, and by whom. As we move through the verses, the title of the hymn 'The Sacrifice of Praise' is reflected in the refrain between each verse: *Gracious God, to thee we raise this our sacrifice of praise.*

Writing in Hebrews 13:15 the Apostle Paul says *"Let us, then, always offer praise to God as our sacrifice through Jesus, which is the offering presented by lips that confess him as Lord."*

We come before God and bring him our praise and worship for all that he is, and for all that he has done and continues to do for each of us as we reflect upon his goodness, his grace.

Let's come to God just now as we join together either listening to, or singing along with the words of the song on YouTube: [We bring the sacrifice of praise.](#)

Let us pray:

Lord, you are more gracious than we can imagine.

You are more holy than we will ever grasp.

You are overflowing in majesty that leaves us breathless.

You are almighty in ways beyond our comprehension.

You are all-loving beyond our expectations.

You require us to seek justice in ways that challenge us.

You demand that our lives and our lifestyle always bring you honour and glory.

You alone are our Saviour our Lord and our Master, and there is no other.

We offer you here and now not mere words, but lips of praise;

Not only songs of worship, but the adoration of hearts that long to know you in Jesus.

Amen.

We share together in the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray:

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,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.



Old Testament Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:21-26 & 41:4 ...

Isaiah 40:21-26 New International Version (NIV).

²¹ *Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded?*

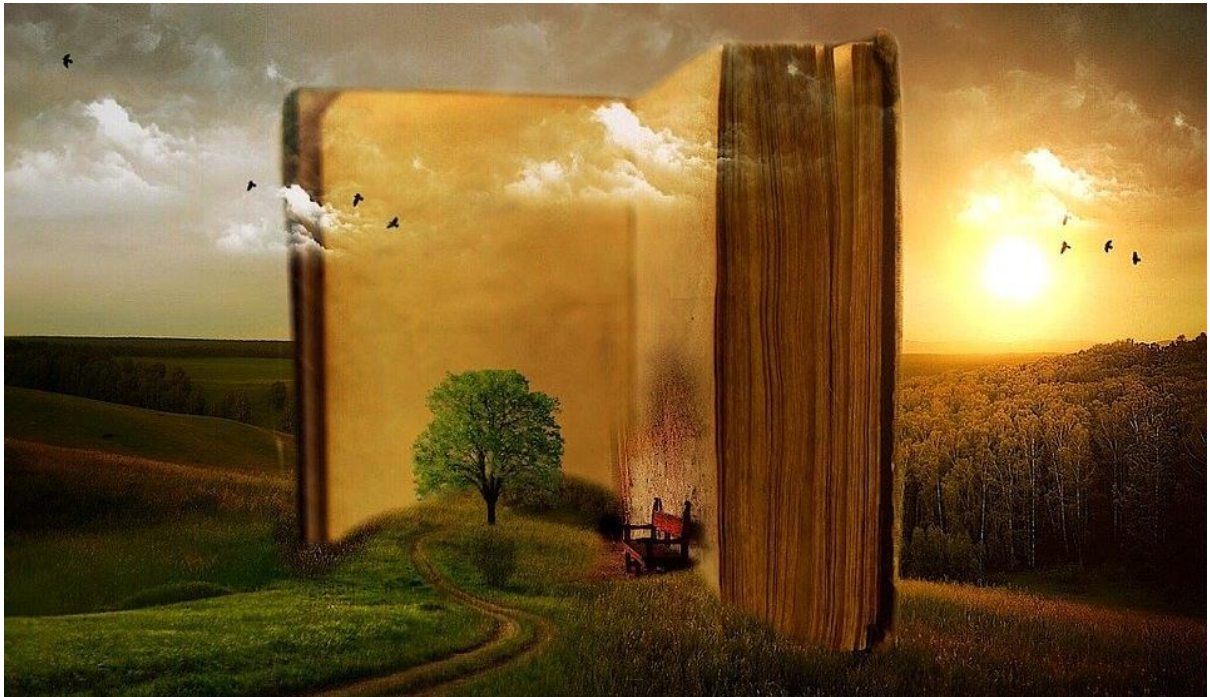
²² *He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in.*

²³ *He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.*

²⁴ *No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.*

²⁵ *"To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.*

²⁶ *Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.*



Isaiah 41:4 New International Version (NIV).

⁴ *Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord—with the first of them and with the last—I am he."*

Family time:

Thinking about the scripture passage we have just read, here are 10 quick questions to discuss and answer:

1. Who sits on his throne above the earth?
2. Who is so great, that compared to him, people seem like grasshoppers?
3. Who created the universe?
4. Who brings down princes and rulers?
5. Who is from the first to the last?
6. Who has a name for every star?
7. Who keeps the universe going?
8. Who makes plans and carries them out without fail?
9. Who is the greatest of all?
10. Who is more powerful than COVID-19?

I hope you got 10 out of 10! I really like it when all of the questions we ask have the same answer, and the answer to all of the above is, 'The Lord, our God.'

When we watch the news on the TV or read the newspapers, especially at this moment in time, we can sometimes think that the world is going out of control and feel scared. At these times we need to remember that God is, and will always be, in control.

Our next song is reminds us that God is in control: [The earth is the Lord's and everything in it](#)

Let's turn together to scripture again. Our **New Testament Scripture Reading** can be found in **2 Corinthians 12:1-10 (NIV)**.

Paul's Vision and His Thorn

12 I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— ⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Here then, we see that God's grace is all we need. It is not by not by our human endeavour, but only by his grace that we are able to come and stand in his presence. We are reminded of this is our next song: [Only by grace can we enter.](#)

REFLECTION:

We now come to consider the 5th verse of the hymn 'For the beauty of the earth' which says, "*For each perfect gift of thine to our race so freely given, graces human and divine, flowers of earth and buds of heaven. Gracious God, to thee we raise this our sacrifice of praise.*"

On Sunday 15th March 2020, my wife Kate and myself joined together with our extended family to celebrate my brother Philip's wedding. I am second from the left in this family photo taken that day, and my elder foster brother, Olu, is second from the right in this photo. Olu has been in my life since my birth, because my parents were fostering him when I was born 54 years ago. Much has happened over those years, and for the greater part we have been apart as families grow up and move on, but here we are as extended family all together.



Just one week and one day later, the UK was put into lockdown on 23rd March in an unprecedented step to attempt to limit the spread of coronavirus. On the 27th March, 12 days after the wedding, my foster brother, was admitted to St Thomas' Hospital London, and went straight to ICU and onto a ventilator as a result on contracting COVID-19. He was to be joined in the same unit not too long afterwards by our Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, for the same reason.

Olu's health yo-yoed up and down, backwards and forwards. Whilst on heavy sedation, and over a number of weekends, we were told the next number of hours were critical. The expression one step forward, two steps back was our reality. Boris Johnson was discharged from hospital on Sunday 12th April 2020 following his battle with COVID-19 whilst my brother Olu remained in ICU still on a ventilator fighting for his life.

Friday 1st May 2020 was a funny old day. Although Kate and I were not on the rota to be at school that day, we still had plenty of school work to do. The day was a bit overcast, cold, and raining on and off.

Our eldest daughter sent a WhatsApp photo of a garden plant asking if we knew what it was as she thought it was a weed! I responded that it was in fact a cornflower, and I went into our garden and took a photo of one of ours, a white one, just coming into bud. Our daughters cornflowers are on the left, and my little white bud is on the right.



A short while later, I got another WhatsApp message from my brother Philip who had just taken a photo of a rainbow that had suddenly appeared outside of his hospital window as he was working.



At around the same time, my youngest brother David got in touch to say that a photo of his church had been on the BBC news linked to a story about coronavirus and rainbows [<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-52500154>]



A member of the general public had taken the photo and sent it in to the BBC as the word HOPE, painted in rainbow colours and displayed in the church windows, had a rainbow emerging from it.

It was now about 7.30pm that evening and outside, the sky which had been dark and dull for most of the day, suddenly lit up with a ray of sunlight that shone across the view beyond our garden back wall. Kate ran out and took a photograph of the farmers field that our house backs onto. It was quite spectacular and a glorious sight the like of which we had not seen before in that way since moving into our house in 2007. The sun shone across the spring barley shooting up through the ground, and glistened on the trees and dual track in the distant horizon.



At 8.30pm, I got a telephone call from Sola, my youngest foster brother, to say that exactly 5 weeks after being admitted straight into ICU Olu had passed away within the last hour, or as Olu's wife put it later, Olu had gone to glory, and I spent the next few hours letting family and friends know that this had happened.

On Sunday 3rd May 2020, I read and listened to Steve's service based on the 3rd verse of the hymn 'For the beauty of the earth' and he concluded with the hymn 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.' I was immediately transported back a couple of days to the glorious sight of the sun breaking through the darkness, seen beyond our back garden wall, which would have been around the time of Olu's death. On reflection it seemed to me that God was perhaps at that time sending us a sign of what was happening within our family, and to our family.

On Monday 4th May 2020, I sat for most of the day trying to get my head and thoughts together around verse 5 of the hymn 'For the beauty of the earth' for today's worship, and having gotten nowhere fast, despite consulting my many theology and sermon books, I went into the garden to get some fresh air and hopefully some inspiration and I noticed that my cornflower bud had come into beautiful bloom as the sun glistened on its tender opened petals.



Having gone back indoors, whilst I hadn't come across any theological insight or teaching on the words '*For each perfect gift of thine to our race so freely given, graces human and divine, flowers of earth and buds of heaven ...*', I did come across one person's thoughts who suggested "*A flower bud represents something not yet realised. You look at a flower bud and it can represent the hope of what might be (i.e., the flower). The flower itself is the realisation, the actualization of that hope. So, in my opinion, 'flowers of earth' is praising God for the real, actual graces that we have already received here on earth, while 'buds of heaven' is praising God for the hope of what is to come.*"

The week before Olu's admission to hospital he had been in self-isolation with symptoms of the coronavirus, and his good health had deteriorated rapidly. Whilst I have a Facebook account, people that know me know that I seldom write anything in Facebook, it is more of an account that enables me to stay in touch with family and friends, but on Monday 13th April, the day after Boris Johnson's hospital discharge, I wrote: "*I do great take comfort in the knowledge that the day before Olu was taken by ambulance to hospital and straight into ICU he rededicated his life to God, and whatever the outcome I know I will see him again, whether that be here on this earth or in the new heaven and new earth that Jesus has gone to prepare for each one of us who have put our faith, belief and trust in Him.*" As Christians, we have this knowledge of eternity now and hope of eternity yet to come. In the Apostle Paul's

letter to the Hebrews 11:1 he wrote, *"To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see."*

Having stood in the garden and having looked at the open cornflower, I thought about the hope that each one of us has as a result of God's grace often explained using the acronym 'God's Riches At Christ's Expense,' for scripture teaches us that Jesus conquered sin and sorrow and death itself through his life, death, resurrection and ascension to heaven, and each one of us can know that victory won in Jesus Christ for ourselves. As I pondered upon these things, I felt God speak to me in my grief found in the words given to the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9, *"My grace is sufficient for you."* But not only for me, God's grace was sufficient for Olu, and God's grace is sufficient for all who would put their faith, trust and belief in God bringing that hope of life eternal now and in the life yet to come.

As we think about '*graces human and divine*' we come to realise that grace is the key to life and it is sufficient for our every need. Grace emphasises not what we do for God, but what God does for us - it is not only his activity for us, it is his activity in us! In Philippians 2:13 the Apostle Paul, who many would say was the greatest Christian teacher next to Jesus Christ himself says, *"for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose."* And so, this morning, I want to suggest that there are three things that God's grace does for us:

Firstly, God's grace will do something for us in the future.

In consideration to the future glory, the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:18-21:

"¹⁸ I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ All of creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal his children. ²⁰ For creation was condemned to lose its purpose, not of its own will, but because God willed it to be so. Yet there was the hope ²¹ that creation itself would one day be set free from its slavery to decay and would share the glorious freedom of the children of God."

And in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 the Apostle Paul says *"⁵¹⁻⁵² Listen to this secret truth: we shall not all die, but when the last trumpet sounds, we shall all be changed in an instant, as quickly as the blinking of an eye. For when the trumpet sounds, the dead will be raised, never to die again, and we shall all be changed."*

Writing in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 the Apostle Paul writes *"¹⁶ There will be the shout of command, the archangel's voice, the sound of God's trumpet, and the Lord himself will come down from heaven. Those who have died believing in Christ will rise to life first; ¹⁷ then we who are living at that time will be gathered up along with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord."*

All of these things are passive, not active. It is God's work, not ours.

Secondly, God's grace has done something for us in the past.

In writing about '*from death to life*' in Ephesians 2:1 the Apostle Paul says, *"In the past you were spiritually dead because of your disobedience and sins."* But he then goes on to say in verses 6-10, *"⁶ In our union with Christ Jesus he raised us up with him to rule with him in the heavenly world. ⁷ He did this to demonstrate for all time to come the extraordinary greatness of his grace in the love he showed us in Christ Jesus. ⁸⁻⁹ For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it. ¹⁰ God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do."* We need to stand, and move, and so action our lives towards others within the grace he gives to each one of us having been made spiritually alive in him.

Thirdly, God's grace is doing something for us in the present in our daily lives.

In Romans 5:10 the Apostle Paul writes, *"¹⁰ We were God's enemies, but he made us his friends through the death of his Son. Now that we are God's friends, how much more will we be saved by Christ's life!"* Here we see that we shall be kept by Jesus' resurrection life, and that we now have the privilege of reigning in life through Jesus Christ. We do this by grace, and his grace is sufficient for us. Writing in 2 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul testifies about just how sufficient the grace of Christ is. To summarise:

- in reflecting upon 2 Corinthians 12:7, we see Paul experiencing a painful difficulty which had been allowed by God;

- in 2 Corinthians 12:8, we see Paul praying about this difficulty asking for it to be taken away;
- in 2 Corinthians 12:9, we see that the Lord answered Paul's prayer, not by removing the difficulty, but by telling him, *"My grace is sufficient for you ..."*.

Here we see that 'is sufficient' means to be possessed of adequate strength, to be strong, to be enough. Christ's strength is unfailing, whatever our situation, and for Paul this was expressed in a burst of praise as he exclaimed, *"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."* How is this possible we may ask? Well, it is only through the sufficiency of God's grace.

God's grace is sufficient for the unchangeable situations in our lives, the circumstances beyond our control, the handicaps we suffer, our sicknesses, and even death itself. Referring to the words of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 25 that *"... the LORD Almighty⁸ ... will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces ..."*, the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:55 asks the questions, *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"* These are rhetorical questions as a result of 'God's Riches At Christ's Expense,' for Jesus won the victory over death through his own death, resurrection and ascension to heaven. So then, whatever we are passing through, even death itself, the Lord says to us, *"My grace is sufficient for you."*

At this personal time of difficulty these last few weeks during lockdown, which to be honest at times feels like a lifetime, as well as meditating on the hymn *'For the beauty of the earth'* I have had the words of a hymn written by Annie Johnson Flint (1866-1932) constantly running through my mind. I first came across these words on a bookmark which I purchased as a young school boy when I went on a school trip to St Katharine Docks in London. I have once again found these words both helpful and encouraging at this current time, and I take this opportunity to share them with you now:

God hath not promised skies always blue,
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;
God hath not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.

*But God hath promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labour, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.*

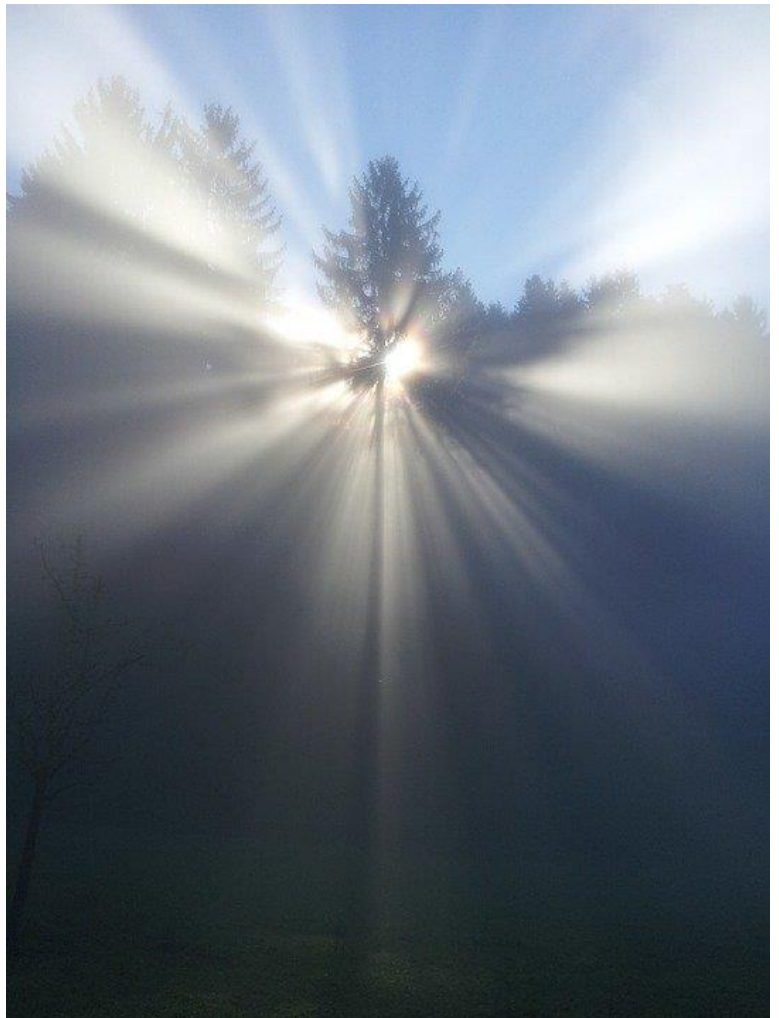
God hath not promised we shall not know
Toil and temptation, trouble and woe;
He hath not told us we shall not bear
Many a burden, many a care.

*But God hath promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labour, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.*

God hath not promised smooth roads and wide,
Swift, easy travel, needing no guide;
Never a mountain, rocky and steep,
Never a river, turbid and deep.

*But God hath promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labour, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.*

May it be so for each one of us. Amen.



Let us now come to a time of intercessory prayer:

Father God, when we see a lost and troubled world, and when we are aware of the sadness, sorrow and pain all around us, we pray, send your word of hope, love and joy to bring an end to guilt and fear and suffering.

Lord, in your mercy hear our pray.

Father God, open our eyes that, like the prophets of old, we may become more aware of your glory and your power surrounding us on every side. We pray, save us from despair, fill us with courage, join our wills to yours and make us channels of your grace and messengers of hope in all we say and do and are.

Lord, in your mercy hear our pray.

Father God, we pray for your church. There are times when we lose our way and are in danger of losing our hold on you. Give you church faith to believe, hope to reach out and love to make real. Rekindle our faith in the promise given to us in the Bible that all tears will be wiped away, as death, sadness, crying and pain will cease though the power of your word in Christ.

Lord, in your mercy hear our pray.

Father God, we pray for Christians everywhere. We ask for courage to stand firm on the promises and teaching of Scripture. In a world that increasingly turns its back on its Maker, keep all your people faithful to you and your word. Give us the courage, the power and the conviction, not only to live by your word, but to make it known everywhere and to everyone.

Lord, in your mercy hear our pray.

Father God, we pray for all who are abused, ignored or made to feel as though they do not matter. We pray that wherever there is hurt and pain there would be the word of healing; where there is cruelty, violence and oppression, there will be the word of hope; where there is injustice, brokenness and arrogance, there too will be the word of peace.

Lord, in your mercy hear our pray.

Father God, we pray for ourselves. Keep convincing us of your tremendous power. Assure us of the height, depth, length and breadth of your love. By your Holy Spirit, save us from despair, fill us with your grace and power and be present with us and for us forever.

Lord, in your mercy hear our pray.

In the name of Christ, God's Word to a lost and hurting world. Amen.

We bring our time of worship to a close with the song by Chris Tomlin: [Amazing Grace \(My Chains Are Gone\)](#)

We share together in The Grace - May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and evermore. Amen.

