

The Swiss Church in London
Audio service, 19 March 2022

Welcome

Welcome to this Lenten audio service from the Swiss Church in London! Organist Peter Yardley-Jones has recorded some beautiful Lenten hymns for you to sing at home, and I, Reverend Carla Maurer, will lead you through the service.

The Bible says: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." (Book of Galatians, 6:2)

The burdens are many these days, the world's burdens alongside our own personal burdens weighing heavy on our shoulders. There are few people who do not carry a burden of some sort. The consequences of the climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the ongoing situation in Syria and Afghanistan and other parts of the world... so much suffering, tears, violence, disaster. It's overwhelming.

Sometimes all we can do is return to the basics, surrender ourselves to God completely, and pray. Surrendering to God means surrendering ourselves to the path of love, to hold on to hope, and strive for peace in thought, word, and deed, preventing us from going down the path of cynicism, fear, and hatred. Love and hope are so important, especially when we feel utterly powerless. It's the fuel that keeps us going, and it's the fuel we need to feel compassion for others and to care for those most in need. If we deviate from the path of love and hope, we are lost, humankind is lost. It's the only way.

May our prayers transform our hearts and transform the hearts of those who have forgotten God's ways. May God teach us forgiveness, compassion and peace.

Let us pray.

Prayer

Living God,

there are times when we feel weighed down by the stresses and strains of life – oppressed by worry, unable to throw off our anxieties, held captive by a multitude of secret fears. We thank you for all those who help us through such moments, who offer a shoulder to lean on, and arm to steady and a hand to share the load. Teach us in turn to bear the burdens of others, doing all we can through listening, understanding, sharing and caring, to offer our help. As you have reached out to us, so teach us to reach out in turn, expressing your love and showing your care, to the glory of your name.

Amen

Hymn *Forty days and forty nights*

Psalm 27

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of God,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of my God
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of my God,
and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to God.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, Lord, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.

Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!

If my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will take me up.
Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.
I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.

Wait for God;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!

Amen

Hymn *Love unknown*

Sermon

Some of you may know the work of documentary filmmaker Louis Theroux. He has produced over 50 documentary films that explore the controversial and complex aspects of the human condition. He shines lights on intriguing beliefs, behaviours, and institutions by getting to know the people at the heart of them. In one of the episodes of his most recent series *Forbidden America*, he immerses himself in Florida's multimillion-dollar rap scene and follows some of its notorious superstars. Many of those superstars grew up in deprived neighbourhoods and witnessed gun crime, drug abuse and street violence from a young age, or becoming involved themselves. Their experiences are often reflected the lyrics and music videos, and often glorifying, even encouraging, gun violence. One of the rap stars says that this simply reflects the reality of their upbringing. Where if not in the arts can the sometimes-brutal reality of our existence be expressed? Gun crime, drug abuse, street and domestic violence are part of many people's reality, perhaps of yours, too. And in that respect there are many parallels between Florida's 21st century rap scene and the Bible.

Let's go back in time, from Florida in the year 2021 to the Kingdom of Judah in Palestine sometime around 1000-800 BC. The Bible tells us about the great King David, first King of the united monarchy of Israel and Judah. According to the Books of Samuel, David is a young shepherd and harpist who gains fame by slaying the giant Goliath and later ascends the throne.

Biblical literature and archaeological finds are the only sources that attest to David's life, and so historically speaking it is difficult to say who David really was or if he even existed at all. According to the Bible, David was a talented musician and song writer, and many of the Psalms are attributed to him, including Psalm 27 that we have just heard. It is however unlikely that David was the sole composer of these Psalms. They were written over a timespan of 400-500 years and more likely co-authored by people whose identity we don't know, and then attributed to the great King to underpin his authority. But whatever the origin of this biblical song collection, their intention is perhaps more interesting than their authorship. What reality do they reflect? What message are they trying to transmit?

King David's Psalms are religious hymns addressed to God. Thematically, they include the description of suffering, protest, petition for God's help, faith, prayer, and thanksgiving... and they also talk about violence and war; and quite a lot, actually. War and violence are omnipresent in the Bible. Some passages are so violent and upsetting that I wouldn't dare reading them out aloud in church. There are calls to slaughter the enemy, every man, woman and child. There are verses about utterly destroying the enemy and their cities. Violence in the Bible is problematic. At the same time, it reflects the reality of human life on earth. It is, sadly, part of the human experience. The war in the Ukraine, the terror in Afghanistan and ongoing conflicts in many other places worldwide are a reminder of this reality.

War in Europe brings closer to home how fragile peace is. We have been taken it for granted for decades. We have seen other parts of the world shattered by war, but Europe felt relatively safe for a long time. That is no longer the case. We feel vulnerable with a war on our doorsteps and the reality of armed conflict closer to home. It could be us. Thoughts of the conflict spreading further into our towns or cities are crossing our mind. What would I do? Where would I go?

War is a reality, now closer to us than ever. King David wasn't a stranger to warfare and violent conflict, and the words of Psalm 27 resonate with us as we are witnessing the war in Ukraine through our news channels.

Though an army encamp against me,

my heart shall not fear;

though war rise up against me,

yet I will be confident.

Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,

for false witnesses have risen against me,

and they are breathing out violence.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord

in the land of the living.

Here, the Psalm expresses the experience of a person on the receiving end of violence, surrounded by an army, struggling with fear, praying for God's protection. Sometimes however, the Bible calls for violence. "Does the Bible justify violence?" is a question that's often asked by scholars. The Bible has inspired pacifism and the civil rights movement. Theories of just or preventive war are rooted in the Bible, and the Bible has even been used to justify genocide and apartheid. The Bible has certainly contributed to violence, precisely because its authority is rooted in God who in essence transcends human discussion and argumentation. It leads us to the question of theodicy, the question of how evil can persist in the world if God is all-knowing, all-powerful and good.

One possible response is that God has given us freewill which limits God's power. Freewill cannot exist without the possibility of evil. We are given the choice between the path of evil and the path of good, because without the possibility of evil, how could we know goodness? This is a huge and complex responsibility, perhaps too much for us humans to bear, and sometimes we utterly fail. We can see it all around us, in the photos that reach us from the war zones of this world, but also in the biblical texts promoting violence and destruction as a reflection of people's experience and the human condition.

Teach us your way, O Lord,
and lead us on a level path,
we pray.

We need your presence, your wisdom and guidance. Be our guiding light, a stream of living water, and never-ending source of love so we may serve your purpose in the face of our adversaries.

Amen

Hymn *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*

Announcements

From April we will return to our pre-pandemic service rhythm at the Swiss Church in Endell Street. We will meet every 1st and 3rd Sunday of the month, with communion every 1st Sunday of the month. We will continue to produce audio services occasionally to connect with our friends worldwide.

Come and join us to mark International Piano Day Tuesday, on 29 March, 1pm. Fiona Brice and Peter Yardley-Jones will perform on the organ and on the grand piano. The admission is free, with a retiring collection.

Our partner charity Soarta in Moldova provides help for Ukrainian refugees crossing the nearby border by giving out hot meals, and providing transport and accommodation. We have launched a fundraising campaign to support Soarta. Please follow the link on the webpage and give generously.

Blessing

God bless you and keep you; God make her face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; God lift up her countenance upon you and give you peace.

Que le Seigneur te bénisse et te garde! Que le Seigneur fasse briller sur toi son visage, qu'il se penche vers toi! Que le Seigneur tourne vers toi son visage, qu'il t'apporte la paix!

Gott segne dich und behüte dich; Gott lasse das Angesicht leuchten über dir und sei dir gnädig; Gott hebe sein Angesicht über dich und gebe dir Frieden.

Gönd in Friede und bringet de Fride i d'Wält. Go in peace and bring peace tot he world.