

Communion Friday Service

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Preacher: John McNeill

[0 : 0 0] by might nor by power but by my spirit says the lord just before i begin my address it's a great privilege as i said earlier at the start of service to be here tonight it's the first day time i've preached in a free church for over a decade i've been in england for 10 years there were no free churches where i was in cambridge or in in leeds um and but i have preached as as some are aware i have preached i took the services in free church in lockdown in isla mill for three months back in the mid 90s and i preached um a in the arden muck and peninsula and in king news in newton moore and up and up up to rosamham in southern kathnest so i do have some experience of being in the free church at that time in the 90s i was in the faith mission and possibly some of you've heard of the faith mission an evangelistic movement so one of my tutors was a a alistair ross who happens to be your minister's uncle and um and so alistair's a very fond memory we we gave him a um you might say a homey name we called him speedy ross because he was so fast when he gave his lectures and we never could keep keep up with him and some of the irish students gave up i still i still have fond memories of that hey but as i started my address i just want to to to begin with an occasion if i can take you back to to my youth i come from south lanarkshire albeit i was born in glasgow my parents are glaswegian um but brought up in south lanarkshire and i went to les mahego high school have you ever passed say west mahego on the m74 you can give us away but um but to get to get to school we had to walk through the hills um and along a river called the nethen which is a tributary of the river quid and i remember when i was about 13 having to walk this route um along the nethen because the bus didn't come with the snow and i thought i better get to school and it happened to be exam result day so i really wanted to be there um and uh and i got my results and and one of my results stands out in my memory quite vividly because it's actually the highest mark i've ever received in my life i've had a few first class but but this one result was i got 99 percent and uh and for most people they'd be very pleased with that it was actually a mathematics exam so theoretically you could get a hundred percent unlike say a history or english exam they're always wanted to make some criticism um but but i remember walking back the three miles to to home crying because i knew when i got home someone who remained nameless was going to say and you probably could guess what happened to the other one percent and uh and it would just make me feel a failure at each time i suppose the idea was to spur me on to greater heights and but it wasn't the most a comforting or encouraging or um uplifting thing to say it was you know quite negative what happened to the other one percent and i give that story as an instance uh perhaps of how i sense gideon in our biblical story this evening he felt at the start of the story i get a sense that he he felt himself a bit of a failure and quite often in scripture you find for example mooses or david they feel very small they feel weak they feel insignificant and they don't feel particularly great it's certainly not in the eyes of others and certainly not in the

eyes of their own and it's exactly what gideon felt about himself he says these words my family is poor in manasseh and i am the least in my father's house and i get a sense that he felt he came from a second tier tribe as one of the 12 tribes and he was born in the wrong end of town and there he was hiding away in this wine press crushing grapes to protect them from being taken away by the the midianites and in the midst of this you might see very weak scene strength someone not feeling particularly strong the angel of the lord appears and so the first thing i want to bring out from this passage is that the spirit of the lord through the angel and you could say it was an apparition of a of of the lord appearing a to gideon as quite often happens in scripture it's called a christophany or a theophany the spirit of the lord through angel convinces gideon of something about himself even in the midst of abject failure and insignificance in verse 14 we hear the lord is with you you mighty man of valor and i'm quoting of course from the authorized because this is the version that i i normally preach from the lord is with you you mighty man of valor and i'm sure that gideon probably thought who me are you is he looked over his shoulder looked around is there someone else you're addressing me it can't be me i'm not this mighty man of valor but no the the spirit of the lord addresses directly gideon and says through the angel you are a mighty man of valor and that seems to me to indicate that something about gideon's character that although he felt weak and insignificant his heart must have been right with god there must have come in a moment in his life when he directed his thoughts towards god and and god had touched through the spirit touched his life and he and that's a moment which must happen to all of us if we're going to be set on on god's way a moment of turning a moment when we our hearts are made right with god and but even though his heart was right still the sense of weakness and helplessness and perhaps maybe tonight there's there's a christian here in the congregation perhaps feeling weak and small and helpless and not particularly significant or doing anything significant in god for god or in his purposes god says his words to you that you in spite of your weakness and sense of helplessness that you are a mighty person of man or woman of valor a person of god because your heart is right with him god very often chooses people who feel small about themselves who feel weak and helpless and ultimately of course is so that god gets all the glory as paul wrote to the corinthians to set it not the things that are the things that are mighty and powerful to set them at naught that all that that that no flesh may glory in my presence god's people clearly are not proud or arrogant and i remember my experience and taking back to the 1990s of working the west highlands

in the sky and going across to louis and harris meeting god's people how humble many of them were and it really touched my life and was blessed by that they seemed small in the eyes of others and yet god saw them as mighty people because they were humble it said of mooses mooses was very meek above all the men who were upon the face of the earth and yet mooses in his meekness look what he accomplished i like what someone once said meekness is not weakness meekness is not weakness and as my my dad is very prone to say i'm not a doormat but i'm a matador and my dad's a very humble person but he's got that inner strength which causes him to go forward in his faith and work for god's gideon was feeble and meek feeble in his own eyes but he was not in god's he was a man after god's own heart and it seems to me that all that gideon needed at that moment in time was a word of encouragement something to quicken him to bring him to life to give him fortitude within some inner strength some power power from and high i recall a moment in my life when i was at that this time i was working in glasgow a and a tour operator in sucky hall street this goes back to the early 90s and uh and there were things happening within the office and another a circumstances which which were discouraging and i felt quite low and i just needed that you might say word of encouragement to give me fresh confidence and it came actually through words of um one of my favorite hymn writers charles wesley and the words were i thank thee whose enlivening voice bids my free heart in thee rejoice god's voice is enlivening it's quickening and it bids our hearts to rejoice even when our circumstances are adverse or difficult we need that word of encouragement to give you might see to give us an extra spring in our step to give us new confidence for what lies ahead it said of john wesley who was the founder of the methodist movement that the flame fell and a well laid fire for wesley everything was in place he'd done all his studies he he was ordained in the church of england but he needed that spark all the preparation everything was there he just needed that spark that inner flame that quickening word and it happened to him one evening at quarter to nine in a street called aldersgate where he had a comment of martin luther on paul's letter to the romans and they heard luther describing justifying faith wesley says i felt my heart strangely warmed and he says in his journal that he knew at that moment his sins were forgiven and that he was indeed a child of god and it gave him courage confidence it gave him boldness and for the next 50 years of his life he preached the length and breadth of this country even coming to aberdeen 14 times and made 70 000 converts by the time he died in 1791 wesley wrote with confidence i now dry draw nigh and father aber father cry that inner confidence that

boldness that's what gideon needed he needed a word of encouragement and the spirit of the lord through the angel said to him the lord is with you you mighty man of valor and god says that to us by his spirit tonight the spirit of the lord convinced gideon the second thing i want to bring from the passage the spirit of the lord led gideon to commit himself in verse 24 of judges 6 we read gideon built an altar there to the lord and he called it jehovah shalom which means the lord send peace then gideon built an altar it seems to me that gideon from that moment was so convinced of who he was in god that he had the confidence the boldness to do something and in this instance it was to build something to god's glory to build an altar and through that altar he made his commitment there's another a well-known passage in scripture in genesis where abraham as you might recall abraham comes from the land of haran from ur of the chaldees he comes enters the promised land and immediately he builds an altar and then he moves moves slightly east to gilgal and again he builds an altar to the lord but then sadly for a period of time abraham continued on his way south and you can see went astray in his faith and his commitment even to god and he ended up in egypt and he handed over his wife to the household of pharaoh until abraham realized the error of his ways but what's fascinating i think is that abraham when he realizes his error he returns to the altar he goes back we read that in genesis chapter 13 verse 4 he goes back to the altar he renews his vows yes he's wandered in his faith yes he's gone off the way but he's gone back to the old paths the old paths of righteousness back to the old paths again and he comes back to the altar because the altar was significant because it marked his commitment just like gideon so the question i suppose we could ask ourselves is how is our commitment in what way do we show our commitment to the lord as god's people has our commitment as we've made that commitment perhaps many years ago has it waxed and waned have we wandered even perhaps not deliberately we've wandered in our ways we've not kept our first love we haven't renewed our vows to the lord and followed his ways commitment of course is it's it can be hard hard going at many times i think back i was in leeds as i shared a shortly a few moments ago i was in leeds for five years and it was a really tough a time in my life i mean i believed god's word i was evangelical and i loved reading a john wesley and yet in the church i was serving i had people dead set against me you could see that within the very sanctuary of god people did not want to hear the bible they didn't want to hear anything evangelical and they told me to my face and that was very very difficult and so in that time yes i was committed but it was it was it was costly it was a costly commitment but i'm reminded a number of

years ago i went i went to india about 10 years ago and i remember actually seeing a physical altar a and a goat sacrifice placed on the altar and the goat slain and i remember the family who brought the goats to this temple and how costly it was to them and the commitment was was sacrificial and it reminded me that as christians commitment is not an easy road it's not an easy path and ct studs perhaps some of you have heard of ct studs he once wrote a book called um a chocolate soldier i got this from george verwer from om a back in the 80s and one of his om ships in glasgow and ct studs makes a sort of parody on a an isaac watts hymn where he says i shall be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas the christian life is not a bed of roses it's not a bed of ease it's hard it's hard going and that's why this this commitment must go deep deep into our hearts deep into our lives to the lord to follow after him all our days and always to renew our vows unto the lord and if you've been convinced of god's grace and i believe this with all my heart if you know god's grace deep in your heart you know that you're that day without god's grace you you'd be completely lost you'd be nowhere you'd be swallowed up in in sin if you know god's grace then surely that heart commitment a is all you can do you can do no less to quote john calvin the reformer we are saved by faith alone but faith that saves is never alone faith that saves always leads to commitment for gideon indeed for abraham their faith led them to build an altar to the lord how do we indicate or show our faith to the lord in my youth i went to hear a well-known missionary called dr helen rosevere and helen rosevere she was a cambridge graduate i believe she was a medical doctor she went to i think it was the congo in north africa and for many years this highly intelligent uh serving lady who gave all to the lord and for god's work she soldiered on and it was caught it was costly she it cost her some of her friends it was affecting her life it was so hard going and i remember she spoke in this particular church one night in hamilton baptist church and it's very vivid in my memory because she painted the picture of someone who who had made that commitment and yet in some ways was coming coming to an end of themselves didn't know which way to turn the the cost was so great she sat apparently one evening hour she sat in the compound of the the missionary compound with the hospital there and she said aloud apparently she said is it worth it is it worth it this cost this commitment is it worth it and apparently just as the words came escaped from her mouth the the moon a a set a in the night sky and it cast a shadow of a cross right in front of her on the compound wall and she looked at the cross the shadow of the cross and as she said the words is it worth it

[20 : 22] she thought to herself he is worthy and many times i suppose even my life you think is it worth it this pain this costly commitment to the lord yes we know god's grace how wonderful it is but can we continue in this path and for helen roseville it was he is worthy she saw the cross the pain the commitment the sacrifice the cost to god to jesus christ it cost god everything for her salvation and indeed for the salvation of the world god it costs god it costs god so much and what it costs us is so infinitely smaller compared to the cost to god and so ct studs the other the great missionary one of the cambridge seven said if jesus christ be god and died for me then no sacrifice you might see no cost can be too great for me to make for him if jesus christ be god and died for me no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him gideon showed his commitment he was convinced of who he was in god and it led him to to mark his commitment by setting up an altar to the lord showing his commitment showing that he has all his life was as it were on the altar as isaac watts one wrote in his great hymn where the whole realm of nature mine were an offering far too small love so amazing so divine demands my soul my life my all the spirit of the lord convinced gideon but through that word of encouragement you mighty man of valor the spirit of the lord moved gideon to commit himself by building an altar and then the final thing i want to bring from the passage is that the spirit of the lord wonderfully controlled gideon in verse 34 of the passage which i didn't i didn't read as far as this in the reading this evening judges 6 verse 34 it says but the spirit of the lord came upon gideon and he blew a trumpet he blew a trumpet notice it wasn't his own trumpet many people are good at blowing their own trumpet it was the trumpet of the lord moises likewise moises had a rose a rod in his hand and god said throw it to the ground and when god said lift it again moises rod became god's rod the trumpet gideon blew was the trumpet of the lord which ultimately was going to lead the israelites to defeat the enemy of the midianites but notice this expression the spirit of the lord came upon gideon and inconsequently he blew a trumpet in the hebrew and i find this fascinating in the hebrew the word translated came upon literally means clothed himself with so you could translate the verse to say the spirit of the lord clothed himself with gideon and he blew a trumpet in effect gideon remarkably became a walking incarnation of of divine energy

oswald chambers perhaps some of you have heard of oswald chambers oswald chambers was born here in aberdeen his father was the founder the founding pastor of crown terrace baptist church oswald chambers once wrote in one of his books or at least one of his lectures that his wife recorded pentecost did not teach the disciples anything rather it made them the incarnation of what they preached pentecost did not teach the disciples anything it made them the incarnation of what they preached you could see in the day of pentecost that the spirit of the lord clothed himself with peter with the other apostles so that they boldly preached they blew a trumpet for the lord the question we can ask ourselves is what clothes us not far from our home was born a very a distinguished and notable figure in 19th century literature thomas carlisle thomas carlisle became known as the sage of chelsea he was born in eclairan and thomas carlisle wrote a book which perhaps one or two here have heard of it's still in print called sartor resartus i was actually flicking through it again this afternoon and it's a book all about the philosophy of clothes and what clothes us and it still makes fascinating reading but clearly in the passage about the spirit of the lord clothing himself with gideon it's not talking about what we might call the outward appearance it's not necessarily saying that gideon had this aesthetically pleasing outward appearance that he was dressed in fine clothes and that he was handsome it's not saying that at all what it's saying is that deep in his heart and his spirit he was clothed the spirit of the lord touching his spirit the bible quite often talks about inner clothing and just to quote one beautiful passage in isaiah 61 the spirit of the lord gives to them beauty for ashes the oil of joy for mourning the garment you might see the the clothing of praise for the spirit of heaviness that they might be called the trees of righteousness the planting of the lord the planting of the lord that he might be glorified it is the spirit the holy spirit's work to to clothe us to robe us to dress us to clothe us in a beautiful spirit a spirit of joy a spirit of praise a spirit for gideon which ultimately led him to to blow a trumpet for the lord a spirit that gave him strength and his weakness a spirit which lifted him up that encouraged him and that's the self-same spirit who is here even tonight oh to be robed dressed and clothed by the spirit you could see the spirit is the best dresser in the world he can dress us even tonight clothe us with himself i just want to give one final little story from my experience i was brought up in a a church community in south lanarkshire and one of the leaders co-leaders was a man called dr kelly who in whose house i i was raised walking heath house and dr kelly had been a a heart specialist at the

victorian infirmary in glasgow and in my youth dr kelly i i remember i remember this quite distinctly dr kelly invited me to the front of the meeting room and he he was illustrating something which i find very personal he was showing me that the christian life was is like making a a divide an exchange you're exchanging something for something else it's not quite a swap but you're something's been taken away and then you're receiving something in return and he always did it with a bible actually um he put it he had a bible in his hand and then he placed it in my hand and and he wanted me to give the bible to him but he had to drop everything else to to receive it and what he was illustrating is that god you might call a divine exchange god wants to to give us something but we have to lose something at the same time we have to you might say we have to lose our sin we have to lose our even our weakness we have to lose our our poverty in exchange we receive god's strength we receive god's righteousness we receive god's riches at christ's expense all the wealth of god is at our disposal but we have to lose a whatever human resources that we have to receive god's riches you might say that we have to take in a reverential we have to take what god offers us and at the same time have this knowledge that god undertakes in our behalf and for that to happen it always it must take place with commitment there's got to be an act of commitment on our behalf there's a responsibility from us but from god's side god undertakes god god is god's the one who makes the first move in his grace and he offers all his riches to us and we accept them and in acceptance wise peace horatius bonar wrote that him make me a captive lord and then i shall go free help me render up the sword that i might conqueror be we have to render up our sword we have to lose something in order to become more than conquerors through him who loved us gideon subsequently in the story becomes this great warrior who leads a very small band of men a to to to battle against the midianites and then god gets all the glory through gideon's life but gideon through the story has to be convinced of who he is he needs to he needs to make an act of commitment he builds that altar and he needs to be clothed by the spirit of the lord and all these things i believe are still relevant to us today we need to know who we are in god that we are children of god we have that inner witness in our hearts saying abba father we're convinced we're led to commit ourselves no matter the cost the sacrifice involved knowing ultimately he is worthy and that we are clothed by this spirit the spirit of the lord the spirit that exchanges our ashes for his beauty the oil of joy for mourning the garment of praise for the spirit of health of heaviness that we might be called trees of righteousness the planting of the lord that he might be glorified and so at the start of this communion season we have

i would say an opportunity to make that fresh commitment wherever we are in our lives whether we've made that first commitment or whether we did commitment many years ago we can renew our commitment as we prepare ourselves to receive a the bread and the wine on sunday morning and so just for a moment i'd like to us to just quiet our hearts before almighty god and whose whose presence we are let us have that sense of losing something our weakness our poverty our sin and that having that exchange to receive the spirit the spirit of joy the spirit of strength the spirit of grace to fill our hearts to be clothed by the spirit that we might be filled into all the fullness of god now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we can ask or imagine to him be the glory in the church and in christ jesus to the ages of ages amen we come then to our final psalm and this this psalm is a psalm with a wonderful psalm follows psalm 90 uh the the prayer of mooses the man of god psalm 91 and we'll sing verses 1 to 12 of psalm 91 we can use these words as we show our commitment to god psalm 91 verses 1 to 12 and it's page 121 i for it

I am to try to say, O Lord, my fortress, and my goal within Him I trust.

[35 : 22] Surely he saves you from the Father's share And rescues you from the deep pestilence Under his wings, a refuge you will find His faithfulness will be your strong defense You will not fear the terror of the night Or dread the arrow flying in the day Or pestilence that in the darkness falls

Or pain that new death carries all the way No one will touch you, no a thousand fall Or yet ten thousand die at your rise And your eyes will then look calm and you will see The wicked punish us their ways demanding If you may not go aside your tragic place Even the Lord who is my refuge

Sure no evil then will ever fall on you Nor dark cloudless see come near your door For he will guide his angels with your care To guard you in your footsteps Everyone they will uphold And bear you in their hands Let you shall strike your foot against the stone Now unto him who is able to keep you from falling

To him who is able to keep us Persevering through our lives In our commitment In our sacrifice to God May he, this God Be with us Undertake for us Fortify us Fortify us By his Spirit And may he Have all the glory In and through our lives The Father The Son And the Holy Spirit Both now And forevermore Amen Amen