

## Call to Worship

The Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud by day,  
to lead them along the way,  
and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light,  
so that they might travel day and night.

(Exodus 13.22)

## Hymn StF 465

Guide me O thou great Redeemer (2:58)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ofp6rdAgRrY>

Today is Black Country Day. It's also Bastille Day in France of course. But why is Black Country Day on 14th July?

On 14th July 1712, at Coneygree Coalworks on the borders of Tipton and Dudley the first practical steam engine was fired up to be used to pump water from the Earl of Dudley coal mines. The engine had been developed by Thomas Newcomen, a native of the County of Devon. He was an ironmonger by trade, and dabbled in engineering. He was also a Baptist Lay Preacher. He rarely visited the Midlands, but it was through his contacts at Bromsgrove Baptist Church that he met Jonathan Hornblower and his son, also Johnathan, engineers who helped him develop his invention. Steam power made flooded coal mines profitable and the industrialisation of the Black Country boomed. Maybe if it wasn't for the Baptist Church and one of its lay preachers, the whole history of the Black Country may have been entirely different.

I chose the Call to Worship, about the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night because it echoes the description of the Black Country by Elihu Burrett, the American Consul to Birmingham, who in 1868 described the area as "The Black Country, black by day and red by night". He added that it "cannot be matched for vast and varied production by any other space of equal radius on the surface of the globe"

No one knows where the term Black Country comes from. One possibility is that the soil in the area was always black, due to outcrops of the thick 30 for thick coal seam that lies across much of that area. Which area? Well it's said the "no two Black Country men or women will agree on where it starts or ends". But it's certainly contained within the four modern boroughs of Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton.,

Let us pray:

## Opening Prayer

Call your labourers who woke early,  
Call your labourers who came late,  
Call your labourers who feel wronged,  
Call your labourers who feel overlooked,  
Call your labourers who can't feed their children with this wage,  
Call your labourers who use their wage to increase your love,  
Call all your labourers, O God,  
Tell us to roll up our sleeves  
For we know that we have work to do.  
Let us find you in the work we share here and now,  
in Christ's presence we pray. Amen.

— adapted from a prayer on the United Church of Christ website

**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

In 2012 Stourbridge schoolgirl Gracie Sheppherd won a competition to design a Black Country Flag. The design has become iconic and widely adopted and loved by the people of the Black Country. It echoes the description of the area as “black by day and red by night”. In between those colours is a white conical shape, representing the glass kilns of Stourbridge and, across the flag is a chain, representing another of the areas prominent industries.

Quite rightly these days many aspects of history are being reassessed and there has been some criticism of the image of chains. It is true after all that Black Country made chains would have found their way onto the slave ships and elsewhere in that the slave trade. But I want to focus on a positive connection today. For it was within the chain making industry that modern workers rights were forged - chains of oppression were broken.

**Hymn StF 345**

And can it be (4:45)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tu2uA6U4Fvg>

**Reading**

Job 28 .1-6, 9-11 (NRSV)

- 1 'Surely there is a mine for silver, and a place for gold to be refined.
- 2 Iron is taken out of the earth, and copper is smelted from ore.
- 3 Miners put an end to darkness,  
and search out to the farthest bound the ore in gloom and deep darkness.
- 4 They open shafts in a valley away from human habitation; they are forgotten by travellers,  
they sway suspended, remote from people.
- 5 As for the earth, out of it comes bread; but underneath it is turned up as by fire.
- 6 Its stones are the place of sapphires, and its dust contains gold.
- 9 'They put their hand to the flinty rock, and overturn mountains by the roots.
- 10 They cut out channels in the rocks, and their eyes see every precious thing.
- 11 The sources of the rivers they probe; hidden things they bring to light.

The industries of the Black Country are very localised. In Cradley Heath and surroundings the specialism was chain making. Famously the anchor for a Titanic and its chain were made at Netherton. But smaller chains were almost exclusively made by women in appalling working conditions.

In 1910 led by women's right campaigner and trades unionist Mary McArthur, the women chain makers of Cradley Heath brought the world's attention to the slave-like conditions they worked in. Around 1000 local women were involved in a 9-week-long strike. The hub of the strike, where meetings were held was Graingers Lane Primitive Methodist Church. The strikers were supported by a strike fund that included generous donations from George Cadbury and Birmingham Wesleyan Synod. The dispute eventually led to the introduction of Britain's first minimum wage.

**Hymn StF 699**

God of Justice

(4:48)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nngOl4mVKc>**Prayer**

Lord, we come together,  
praying for your guidance for our ministry.  
Lord, we pray that you will: Strengthen the chains  
that link us together as churches and with our fellow Christians.

Lord, we pray that you will  
break the chains  
that imprison us as living only in the past, and that prevent us having the courage  
to venture into the future.

Lord, we pray that you will:  
Help us to mine  
the rich seams of your love that already exist in our towns and in our churches.  
May your love fuel the fire of our desire  
to serve you anew each day.

Lord, we pray that you will:  
Inspire us to live our lives  
in such ways that, through us,  
your love sparkles as does light  
through the finest crystal.  
May others catch in us a glimmer of your glory,  
a reflection of you in the way we live our lives.

Lord, we pray that you will:  
create in us, not hearts cast as iron,  
but hearts that are warmed  
with such a knowledge of your love  
that we may be moulded anew each day so as to be effective in your service  
and that of all people.

Amen.

*Mike Claridge*

A common theme of our stories from history tonight has been Christian witness and endeavour. It was a Baptist lay preacher, Thomas Newcomen, who invented that first steam engine. It was his meeting with fellow Baptist's the Hornblowers that possibly led to the Dudley connection and certainly aided the development of Newcomen's invention. It was a Methodist Church in Cradley Heath that provided the venue for the strike meetings during the Women Chainmakers Strike for justice. The strike fund was supported by Birmingham Wesleyan Synod and people such as George Cadbury.

### **Closing Prayer**

Jesus, you were a storyteller,  
you talked about money, wages and taxes,  
you told stories about integrity and forgiveness,  
you helped people who were in trouble,  
you listened to people who were sad.  
You call us to live as you did -  
to listen to each other,  
to be forgiving,  
and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

*(from 'A Service for Justice and Peace' in the Iona Worship Book)*

### **Hymn StF 701**

Heaven shall not wait (2:34)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHMt3YJHbZE>

### **The Grace**