

Sunday 5th July 2020

Christ the hope for the weary – Isaiah 40:21-31, Ephesians 1:11-14

Talk by Laura Polaine, Prayers by Hazel Wilson

Good morning and welcome to St Johns online reflection. Today, we will be focusing on Christ the hope for the weary through looking at two scriptures one from Isaiah 40:21-31 and the other from Ephesians 1:11-14. First, Hazel will lead us in prayer.

The Old Testament prophets, like Isaiah, called the people to grieve for past mistakes; gave God's comfort and consolation for the present; and foretold a better future. We will reflect on this in our prayers –

*'Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways,
Reclothe us in our rightful mind; in purer lives Thy service find
In deeper reverence praise'*

Loving Father, we recognise, along with your people the Israelites of old, how far we fall short of your standards, and how leaving You out of our lives, means we, and your world, have ended up in a real mess, politically, economically, spiritually and physically. We pray for those hurting, and without hope – for countries filled with violence and hatred; and those living in poverty, either as a result of human mismanagement and greed, or natural disasters brought about by climate change. We cry to You for children denied food, education, family security and joy; and for the elderly, frail and frightened. We pray for all who have not heard that You are the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth and the starry heavens; and those who cannot feel Your loving strength and power for their weariness. Father, bend our pride to Your control, and thank you for all who go in Your name to take Your love to others, in so many different ways. For pinpricks of light in the darkness, and the hope that they bring.

Loving Father, thank you that when we fall, and truly repent, You are ever ready to hear, to heal, to forgive and comfort. Thank you that in times of turmoil Your Spirit is there to lead us where our trust is without borders, and thank you that You have never failed us and You won't start now. We pray for others and ourselves in this uncharted territory. We pray for those who have been affected in any way by the virus, those who care for them, and also those who have lost loved ones in so many different circumstances, whether by violence or illness. We particularly pray for all affected by the death of Jean Marzetti on Friday, including Margaret and Tom Davies. Continue to draw near, Comforter, and help us all to keep living in the present moment, for You are the great 'I AM'. We pray for leaders and governments across the world, and for a spirit of cooperation and kindness. We pray wisdom and Your guidance for all makers of far-reaching decisions about peoples' welfare, and we pray for restraint and patience for all as the lockdown eases. Help our emergency services in sometimes difficult decisions and actions. May we all realize that all lives matter to You.

Loving Father, You promise in Your word to do a 'new thing', and Your prophets foretold a future time of joy, peace and plenty. As we look forward to the 'new normal' we pray that You will help us by Your spirit to build a better world, a fairer world, a world where Your name is honoured and Your kingdom grows. We pray for a new chapter in the life of St John's, and a welcoming of Your choice of person to lead and serve us. Be with our wardens and PCC as they plan and care. We pray that those who have sought You in lockdown, may truly get to know You in the future, and we thank you for Your promise of eternal life guaranteed by the 'deposit' of Your holy spirit now.

*Have you not known there's an everlasting God?
O give thanks, O give thanks to the Lord
Have you not heard He is Lord of all the earth?
O give thanks, O give thanks to the Lord.
The waters and the land are in the hollow of His hand
O give thanks, O give thanks to the Lord
For He is the one who makes the weary strong
Let the joy of the Lord be our song.*

*Lift your eyes and see His vast eternity
O give thanks, O give thanks to the Lord
Like the stars, He knows our name, by His power we remain
O give thanks, O give thanks to the Lord
For all that He has done, our salvation He has won
O give thanks, O give thanks to the Lord
For He is the one who makes the weary strong
Let the joy of the Lord be our song.*

*We will run and not grow weary in the race
We will rise up on eagle's wings and soar before His face
He is God, and he has saved us by His grace
Hallelujah! He is God.*

Help us Loving Father, to learn from the past, to rest in Your present, and trust You for Your future. In Jesus' name, who is the same yesterday, today and for ever. Amen

Our father in heaven, hallowed be Your name
Your kingdom come, Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against us
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are Yours
Now and for ever, Amen.

Readings

Our first reading today is taken from Isaiah, chapter 40 verses 21-31 - 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.

²⁷ Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,

"My way is hidden from the Lord;
my cause is disregarded by my God"?

²⁸ Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;

³¹ but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;

they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

Our second reading is taken from Ephesians chapter 1, verses 11-14 - New International Version (NIV)

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Talk

Has there been a time this last week or month when you have felt weary, or perhaps this morning? We can feel weary in different ways; physically, mentally, weary from not being able to see what is around the corner in these times as lockdown eases. Where do we get our energy from to go forward, when we feel we have no strength left. As humans our strength is finite, but in the Isaiah passage read today, verse 28-29 it says 'The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, He gives strength to the weary, and increases the power of the weak.' As we unpack today's readings our focus is on the hope that we have in Christ.

In Isaiah chapter 40 starting at verse 21, we see how God is almighty and all-powerful - He is the creator of the entire universe, including the billions upon billions of stars. In verse 22 'He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in'. Compared to God, the people of this world, even its great leaders, are 'like grasshoppers' (v22). And in the MSG version 'the people look like mere ants'. In verse 23 '[God] reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. 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'. Can we compare God to anything? We can describe God as best we can with our limited knowledge and language, but we limit our understanding of him and his power when we compare him to what we experience on earth.

In verse 26 'Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens..... He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name', or put another way, like a shepherd calling his flock. This is the almighty God all-powerful, yet who at the same time loves you and me personally and carries us close to his heart. How to comprehend this, when we are so small in the universe? In my reflections, I was reminded of the song 'Indescribable', by Chris Tomlin:

From the highest of heights to the depths of the sea
Creations revealing Your majesty

From the colors of fall to the fragrance of spring
Every creature unique in the song that it sings
All exclaiming

Indescribable, uncontainable,
You placed the stars in the sky and You know them by name.
You are amazing God
All powerful, untameable,
Awestruck we fall to our knees as we humbly proclaim
You are amazing God

Whilst he is all-powerful, he is a power-sharing God. He doesn't keep his power to himself, he wants to share it with us - In verse 31 'but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength'. Here the people need not fear that they have been abandoned, because the creator's endless power and wisdom is shared with the weary, with the weak, they only need to wait in hope for the time to come. We are called to do the same. To wait on God is not simply to mark time, rather it is to live in confident expectation of his action on our behalf. It is to refuse to run ahead of him in trying to solve our problems for ourselves. Do we trust that God will fulfil his promises in his Word and strengthen us to rise above life's difficulties? In the MSG version (vv29-32) 'He energises those who get tired... those who wait upon God get fresh strength'. God is never too tired or too busy to help and listen. His strength is our source of strength. When you feel you cannot go another step, quietly wait on God, study his word, pray, worship and meditate on his love - He will restore you, re-energise you and empower you to face everything you need to do. God's power and strength never diminish.

Why does God share his power with us, why and how does he love us? In Ephesians, Paul unpacks this in explaining the wonders of salvation of Christ and helps people know the significance of the gift of life with Christ. The reading today follows on from last week, where Paul is writing a letter, a prayer of praise to God. As was mentioned last Sunday Paul dictates his speech without pause for breath, and commentators have searched for metaphors vivid enough to convey the impact of this opening outburst of adoration.

Paul indicates that spiritual blessings are available for everyone, and in the context of the day that is for both Jewish and Gentile believers. Christ is the reconciler, and that it is through union with Christ that we the people of God are one. In the passage Paul refers to having life 'in Christ'. In Christ we receive his blessings; grace & peace (vv7-8), that we are chosen, destined and adopted (vv4-5,11), we are redeemed, forgiven, and free, and are our sins forgiven (vv7). The two blessings from today's passage which we will focus on are i) the gift of the Holy Spirit, and ii) our hope for the future. This is unpacked in three great truths about us, God's people and addresses the questions why God shares his power – and why/how he loves us.

Firstly, **we are God's people, God's possession.** We have been chosen as God's portion that is - referring to inheritance. All those who are *in Christ* (Jews and Gentiles), are now God's heritage, just as Israel was in the Old Testament days. It indicates our identity. In our lives we look for

identity, where we fit in, in this world. Many struggle with a low self-image, but it is in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for' (v11,MSG). Our identity is *in* Christ. *With the world our identity is earned. With our God our identity is graced.* So how did we become God's people or possession?

This brings us to the second point; Paul is clear when he says we became God's people by the will of God. **God's people depend on God's will.** God destined us to be his son/daughters according to the purpose of his will (vv11,12). Our becoming members of God's new community was due neither to chance nor to choice, but to God's own sovereign will. Now, this is not to say we are inactive in our salvation, we do have our responsibility to believe in Christ, but we are set free by him to believe. God acted first. He created us so that we can be with him to live holy lives.

As part of God's will for us is the gift of the Holy Spirit - the assurance that God is active in our lives. The Holy Spirit is God's 'promise' to us (v13,14), because God promised through the Old Testament prophets and through Jesus that the Holy Spirit would be sent which he did on the day of Pentecost, and God promises to give the Holy Spirit today to everyone who repents and believes. The Holy Spirit is also a 'seal'. A seal is a mark of ownership and of authenticity. In the ancient world when a package was dispatched a seal was placed on it to indicate where it has come from and to whom it belonged. You and I have been 'sealed' with the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament seals were external, while God's seal is in the heart. The presence of the Holy Spirit in us demonstrates the genuineness of our faith, proves that we are God's children. The Holy Spirit is also God's 'guarantee' or 'pledge', by which he undertakes to bring us safely to our final inheritance which is our hope for the future. 'Guarantee' is taken from a Hebrew word – and in ancient commercial transactions it signified a 'first down payment, instalment, deposit.' that pays part of the purchase price in advance, and so makes a contract valid. As John Stott illustrates it can be compared to a deposit on a house – which is more than a guarantee of payment; it is itself the actual first instalment of the purchase price. In giving the Holy Spirit to us, God is not just promising us our final inheritance but actually giving us a foretaste of it, with the Holy Spirit living in us, which however is still only a small fraction of the future endowment of eternity. The Holy Spirit begins to transform/change us, and love is one of such changes. We are called to be a church community of changed people - people who reach out and serve others as we are doing through our Vision at St Johns.

Thirdly, **Why did God make us his people.** Paul writes that it was **to live for God's glory.** God destined us to be his children 'to the praise of his glorious grace' (5-6). He appointed us to live 'for the praise of his glory' (vs 12). To live to the praise of the glory of his grace is both to worship him ourselves by our words and deeds, and to cause others to see and to praise him too. This was God's will for Israel in the Old Testament, and it is also his purpose for his people today. We are exposed to the self-centredness of the world – which promotes to be confident in one's own will and praise of own glory, but as God's people we have begun to be turned inside out for as God's people we live by God's will and for God's glory. We can ask why do people fail to live in relation to God and to serve him? Is it because God is viewed as remote; cut off from his people and not involved? Ephesians shows that God is not remote, that he has been

and is active for us, and that he will affect both individuals and the church by what he does. The God we worship is Father to us, we are his children, and his Spirit has been given to us. Knowledge of God leads to wonder and worship. Tom Wrights points out – “You become like what you worship” Devotion shapes us, but since we were created in the Image of God, only God has the right to shape us.

To end I will read a doxology summarising the first part of Ephesians Chapter 1: taken from the NIV application commentary:

How marvellous God is! His Spirit has provided everything needed for life. Every good thing has been made available in Christ. We praise such a God. Right from the first God has been busy devising a way to draw us home to himself so that we may live with him and for him. Through Jesus Christ he has made us family. As a result, we owe God praise for the way he freely gave himself to us in Christ. In Christ’s death God’s abundant care for us is known. God gave himself for us to bring us back and make us his people. What lavish love he has for us! We honour you, God. In his unfathomable wisdom God has made known his plan and desire to bring all things together in Christ. This includes everything in our world and everything in God’s world. Amazingly God’s plan includes us and gives us a share in what he is doing. For this we owe God praise for the hope that is ours in Christ. When we heard about the truth from God and believed the good news about his plan, God marked us as his own by giving us his Spirit. The Spirit’s dwelling in us is a pledge from God that he will complete his plan and that one day we will truly live with God. For this we owe God praise. Our God, we do worship you.

Let us pray:

Father, thank you, that you provide us with your strength through the Holy Spirit and that our hope is in you. Help us to respond to your call to a life of faith in you, shaped by your Word – and where we truly release ourselves into your hands without any reservation, a life where we are constantly giving ourselves and our concerns in your caring hands.

Amen

Final Blessing

The Lord bless us and watch over us;

The Lord make his face shine upon us and be gracious to us

The Lord look kindly on us and give us peace.

Amen