

Sunday 27th September 2020

Psalm 103 - Hopes

Talk by Russell Jones, Prayers by Kemi Ogundipe

Good morning. Welcome to this morning's service, which is Harvest Sunday. We'll be reading Psalm 103, one of the greatest expressions of God's loving nature and a poem of hope-filled encouragement for us during difficult times.

Thank you to everyone who has supported the food bank and has responded to the harvest appeal made by Sue last Sunday. As we approach God in worship this week, we will think about our own dependence on Him, and all He has done for us. Harvest Sunday is a time when we can be especially aware of the physical gifts we receive in God's Creation. Let's pray together with gratitude now as we mark this day in the church calendar and offer thanks to our God.

And now Kemi will lead us in our prayers.

Prayers

Let us pray. Holy God, you have called us here today, we gather to offer you our prayers, which is from our hearts, of love for you, and our love and concern for those we love and for the people of the world. We live in a sinful world and we have fallen short in one way or the other, despite our sinfulness, you forgive and forget. Thank you for offering yourself to us as a tender and compassionate father. Though we cannot hold on to you physically, but we can receive your love in our hearts by the holy Spirit.

We pray as we unlock our parish by weekly private prayer, monthly reflective and said services, we ask you to encourage members and community to attend so we can start to look forward to our main Sunday worship.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

We pray for churches in our local community and ask that there will be growing desire to get together and get out.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

We remember the queen and her government, all members of parliament, that the guidance of your Holy Spirit, help them never to lead the country wrongly through love and power, desire to please but laying aside all private interest and prejudice, keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of mankind.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

We pray for your blessings over medical researchers who are searching for the vaccine for coronavirus, give them your wisdom and insight speed their work and make it effective in protecting lives.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

We pray for our mission the Day family in Thailand, we ask you for your blessings and protection over them.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

We pray for food bank for continuous donation especially today our family harvest we are unable to celebrate due to coronavirus, encourage our members to donate generously this week and at all times, we pray you enrich our purses and help us to be a blessing to our community and for those who use the food bank to come to know you through the good news of your son Jesus Christ, churches in the community are spreading.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

We bring to you those who are ill or suffering, remembering Antony Wedderburn, Carol and anyone you know and name quietly in your hearts. Give them healing and restore them in body, mind and spirit, and for those recovering Val Beckway and anyone you know and name quietly in your hearts. Give them full wholeness recovery. Father we pray for healing for Lorraine Baker.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

Father, be close to those who are recently bereaved, strengthen them with the knowledge that you are always there to lean on and to be carried through difficult times.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

We thank you for those who come up with fresh ways, of making your name known, to surrounding community and for those who work so hard to make worship possible through online and zoom.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

Faithful God, at the start of this new week, help us to be example to others and show us the practical steps we need to take to develop consistency and integrity in all that we do in our lives.

Lord in your mercy/**Hear our prayer**

The Collect

O Lord, we beseech you mercifully, to hear the prayers of your people, who call upon, and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil them through Jesus Christ your son, our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you in the holy spirit, one God and forever.

And all people said **AMEN**.

Now I'll read Psalm 103.

¹Praise the LORD, my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
²Praise the LORD, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits –
³who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
⁴who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
⁵who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the
eagle's.
⁶The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.
⁷He made known his ways to Moses,
his deeds to the people of Israel:
⁸the LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
⁹He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbour his anger for ever;
¹⁰he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the
earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
¹²as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions
from us.

¹³As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who
fear him;
¹⁴for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
¹⁵The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;
¹⁶the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
¹⁷But from everlasting to everlasting
the LORD's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's
children –
¹⁸with those who keep his covenant
and remember to obey his precepts.
¹⁹The LORD has established his throne in
heaven,
and his kingdom rules over all.
²⁰Praise the LORD, you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
who obey his word.
²¹Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts,
you his servants who do his will.
²²Praise the LORD, all his works
everywhere in his dominion.
Praise the LORD, my soul

'Praise the Lord' can become an automatic phrase, a given which we don't really feel when we hear or say it, so when we come to this heartfelt psalm it helps us remember why we say 'Praise the Lord', and it lifts us up in our faith. This is a poem full of reasons to praise our God, and it offers a hope that is personal, then national and at the end becomes universal in the true sense of that word.

This is a psalm where it's important to read it as a poem. That brings out its meaning more clearly because it has a structure, divided into sections that each offer a different response to God, and it builds up to a strong conclusion, just like a poem in English.

Do you ever write notes to yourself as a reminder? Feed the cat, buy the milk, that sort of thing? The psalm starts small, personally, with the poet's inner self: 'Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name'. O my soul was a standard way of addressing yourself in ancient Hebrew, and 'soul' didn't mean the inner self rather than the outer, or the spiritual part that is different to the physical body, which is our meaning for the word. It is more the consciousness, the very being of a person. It's saying 'Never mind the cat food, and the milk. Don't forget to praise God's name, that is to praise God for His name, His very nature, because that's the purpose of my very being!

The first five verses offer us some personal reasons to do it – it's a list of personal benefits that God gives us. He forgives our sins; He heals diseases; He redeems us from the pit, meaning the grave. 'Redeems' reminds us that He has paid for our release from the death that our sins deserve, and as Christians we know that Jesus did that, unlike the author who didn't have the vivid, graphic revelation of redemption given through the cross and resurrection. More benefits, as God offers love and compassion, His key characteristics repeated through the psalm. You can see them mentioned again in verses 8, 11, 13 and 17. When John explained in his letters that 'God is Love' it was a radical theological insight to the fledgling churches of the first century, and an insight that was often obscured until the late 20th century, it seems, but Psalm 103 certainly understood it.

As well as forgiveness, healing, redemption and love, God offers satisfaction and renewal. The original Hebrew word for 'sins' in verse 3 is one which depicts something twisted and distorted, so the picture is of God reshaping us into the healthy, peaceful form that He desires, a compassionate carer who nurses us back to health when our spirits have slid off the best path. Illness is often used as a picture of sin in the Bible, and people, including the Pharisees in Jesus' day, and Jehovah's Witnesses in ours, still mistakenly believe that illness must be the result of sin, despite Jesus clearly teaching that it is not. Nor does God have to heal every believer who asks. Paul mentioned that two of his friends died despite prayer for them, and David, who probably wrote this psalm, lost his son despite fasting and praying for healing. We all age and weaken, and our bodies cannot be delivered from weakness and disease until we are redeemed and glorified, as promised, at the return of Christ.

Illness is a picture of sin in some Scriptures, and healing is a picture of salvation, but it is important to remember they are pictures, images, poetic devices to illustrate; they are not factual equivalents. Otherwise we end up thinking that an ill believer who isn't healed hasn't got enough faith, and just imagine the effect on an ill person of telling them such a lie. What does this psalm say is given to someone who is waiting for healing? God's love and compassion - so what can we offer to someone who is ill? Our love and compassion – because we want to do God's will. Our desires to love will be satisfied, the psalmist says, and our strength will be renewed.

The central section of the poem is framed by verses 6 and 19. When you put them together, you see that this offers an image of God's kingdom, His priorities as a ruler, and the 12 verses in between are a hymn of national praise. Verse 6 reminds us that God works for righteousness, that is doing right by following His wishes, and wants justice for all the oppressed. Those then should be the priorities of human government, where those who are oppressed receive just treatment. Verse 19, the conclusion of this poetic section, reminds us that God's kingdom is established in heaven and rules over all. His will is certain to be done, whether willingly with our help through just and compassionate human government, or unwillingly through the trials and sufferings that result inevitably from injustice.

I think my favourite part of any psalm comes in the description of God in verses 7 to 18. These 12 verses are in six couplets, that is six pairs of lines that rhymed before they were translated. Each couplet follows the usual form of ancient Hebrew poetry where the first verse makes a statement, and the second one develops or applies it. Four times in this psalm the first half of the couplet is about an aspect of God's character, and the second is a reflection on His relationship with us.

The national section addressed to God's people begins with a reminder that God told Moses His will; He explained why he was doing what He was doing, and verse 8 tells us what God revealed about Himself to Moses: He is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, full of love. Verse 9 offers a courtroom picture where God is angry about sin, but He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. He is judge and prosecutor, but He removes our sins from us. Jesus' death on the cross has offered us the pardon we cannot earn, and this was God's will from the start. As far as the east is from the

west, he has removed our transgressions, a word that suggests our crossing the line. The east from the west, perhaps suggesting the sunrise from the sunset, the beginning from the end; those are completely different and far apart, but they are also part of the same wholeness as the same place can be in the east or west, the same place experiences both sunrise and sunset, God knew us in the womb at the start and will still know us after death at the end. God is compassionate, like a father to his children, because He knows we are only dust, and the part of our lives spent on Earth is short, as impermanent as a flower. Therefore, because it is so hard for us to do it in our own strength, he puts our sins away from us. You're in the dock; the judge has all the evidence and knows you're guilty, but he lets you go free if you acknowledge the love of his son, the son who takes your place to receive the sentence that you deserve.

After all the images of life's brevity the couplets conclude with a declaration of God's permanence, and that His love for us is permanent too. When we accept Christ as Saviour, we enter a covenant, just as the Israelites at Mount Sinai did, and His love for us when we keep Christ in our hearts is 'from everlasting to everlasting' and 'his righteousness with our children's children' is a great promise. We have already been blessed with 'every spiritual blessing in Christ', a verse from Ephesians that we heard recently, and that blessing will continue forever.

The final section, verses 20 to 22, offers a new perspective of God as ruler not only of each person, and of each nation, but of the universe seen and unseen. It is a huge climactic offering of praise, reminding us that God is the creator of all things, his angels, his heavenly hosts, and all his works. These are powerful beings and creations, as permanent as mountains, but do you see the point? Little us, brief and weak, have more reason to praise God than all of these angels and created things, and more reason to be grateful for His loving compassion. That is why the psalm comes back to the individual at the end, and why we gather to sing praises to Him, confess to Him, ask Him to help, and to declare our faith in Him as a body of believers. 'Praise the Lord, O my soul'.

To conclude our service this morning here is a final blessing.

Blessing

To him who is able to keep you from falling
and to present you before his glorious presence without fault,
and with great joy – to the only God our saviour
be glory, majesty, authority and power
through Jesus Christ our lord,
before all ages, now and for evermore! Amen.