

17th November 2024 – Morning Service

What can we do?

Megan Ashmore

Introduction

On this 2nd Sunday before Advent the lectionary readings turn our thoughts to the end times. So our call to worship is a message of hope, reassurance and love:

Call to Worship - Romans 8:38 – 39

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Gathering Prayer

Almighty God, we offer you this morning's worship. May our hymn singing be filled with love. May our prayers be filled with meaning. May our eyes, ears, hearts and minds be willing and ready to receive your word, that we may know your presence with us here this morning and always. **Amen.**

StF 65 – Sing of the Lord's goodness

1) Sing of the Lord's goodness,
Father of all wisdom,
Come to him and bless his name.
Mercy he has shown us, his love is for ever,
Faithful to the end of days.

3) Courage in our darkness,
Comfort in our sorrow,
Spirit of our God most high;
Solace for the weary, pardon for the sinner,
Splendour of the living God.

*Ch) Come then, all you nations,
Sing of your Lord's goodness,
Melodies of praise and thanks to God.
Ring out the Lord's glory,
Praise him with your music,
Worship him and bless his name.*

4) Praise him with your singing,
Praise him with the trumpet,
Praise God with the lute and harp;
Praise him with the cymbals,
Praise him with your dancing,
Praise God till the end of days.

2) Power he has wielded, honour is his garment,
Risen from the snares of death.
His word he has spoken,
One bread he has broken,
New life he now gives to all.

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Reading: Psalm 16

Protect me, Lord God! I run to you for safety, and I have said, "Only you are my Lord! Every good thing I have is a gift from you." Your people are wonderful, and they make me happy, but worshipers of other gods will have much sorrow. I refuse to offer sacrifices of blood to those gods or worship in their name. You, Lord, are all I want! You are my choice, and you keep me safe. You make my life pleasant, and my future is bright. I praise you, Lord, for being my guide. Even in the darkest night, your teachings fill my mind. I will always look to you, as you stand beside me and protect me from fear. With all my heart, I will celebrate, and I can safely rest. I am your chosen one. You won't leave me in the grave or let my body decay. You have shown me the path to life, and you make me glad by being near to me. Sitting at your right side, I will always be joyful.

Prayer of Adoration and Thanks

Thank you, Lord God, for the opportunity to worship you today; for the freedom to be amongst your family meeting together in the warmth of your embrace. Thank you that in worship we can put aside the uncertainties of this world and rest upon the certainties of the Kingdom, for your promises are not changeable but immovable and eternal. Thank you that we can bring to your feet all the hurts and fears that trouble us, and leave them there, knowing that your strength and assurance are all that we require. Thank you that as we draw near in worship, we are brought into a place where we can be at peace in your presence, find healing, wholeness and refreshment. Thank you, Lord God, for the opportunity of worship.¹

Lord of the day, Lord of the night, Lord of betwixt shades, I'm held in your sight.

Lord of the sea, Lord of the land, Lord of all places, I'm held in your hand.

Lord of the storm, Lord of the calm, Lord of all weather, I'm held in your palm.

Lord of the joy, Lord of the pain, Lord of all feeling, with you I'll remain. Amen.²

StF 455 – All my hope on God is founded

- 1) All my hope on God is founded;
He doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
Only good and only true.
God unknown, He alone
Calls my heart to be his own.
- 2) Human pride and earthly glory,
Sword and crown betray our trust;
What with care and toil we fashion,
Tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power, hour by hour,
Is my temple and my tower.
- 3) God's great goodness aye endureth,
Deep his wisdom passing thought;
Splendour, light, and life attend him,
Beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore, from his store
New-born worlds rise and adore.
- 4) Daily doth the almighty giver
Bounteous gifts on us bestow;
His desire our soul delighteth,
Pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand, at his hand;
Joy doth wait on his command.
- 5) Still from earth to God eternal
Sacrifice of praise be done,
High above all praises praising
For the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call, one and all;
Ye who follow shall not fall.

Robert Bridges

Reading: Mark 13: 1 – 13 - Destruction of the Temple and Signs of the End Times

As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?" Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them.

And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Reflection

I like Mark's gospel. Being one who is rather impatient I appreciate Mark's straightforward writing which gives us the gospel story succinctly. However I do often wonder about the bits in between the main points. For example, what was the conversation of Peter, Andrew, James and John as they followed Jesus from the temple towards the Mount of Olives? Maybe it went something like this.....

Peter: Did you hear what he said?

James: "Not one stone here will be left on another;

John: every one will be thrown down."

Andrew: What does he mean?

Pause

Peter: Was the overturning of the tables and the benches the other day just the start?

James: Are we going to march on the temple and bring it to its knees.....

John:clear it out for its proper purpose?

Pause

James: (*Slap Peter on the shoulder*) Peter, you ask him. You're bold.

Peter: (*Put arm around John's shoulder*) But John, you're his closest friend.

John: Aye! And look what trouble we got into last time we asked him a question. (*James cringes*)

Peter: Well, you were a bit cheeky asking to sit either side of him in glory!

Andrew: This is different. We just want some clarification. Ask when it will be and how we will know.

And so the four friends sought some answers from Jesus. But Jesus didn't answer their questions.

Stuart has a strange, and Esme would say, annoying way of not answering a particular question directly. If we are planning a day out and we ask what time we will be leaving, we are treated to a step by step analysis of the journey – for example: "Well the sat nav says 2 and a half hours but that's now and it could be busier on a Saturday; and are there still roadworks at the junction? Then I shall probably need petrol and we need to find somewhere to park so I should think By which time Esme has drawn her own conclusion.

Politicians too have a unique way of not quite answering the question put to them. Someone has done an analysis of Theresa May when she was prime minister responding to questions put to her by Andrew Marr. Their conclusion is that "May's responses are polite and relevant to the substance of the question, but do not provide the requested information." Jesus didn't answer the disciple's questions. Not because he was trying to avoid giving an answer; nor because he hadn't worked it out. It was because the disciples were asking the wrong question. They didn't need to know when these events would happen, nor if there were going to be any warning signs. But they did need to know to be ready. The question they should have asked was "what can we do?"

Is that true of us? Do we ask the wrong questions of God? Do we ask, "When will there be peace on earth Lord?" or "Why don't people come to church anymore Lord?" instead of asking "What can we do to proclaim the good news of the gospel in this troubled world?" or "How can we share the love of God with the people we meet?" "What can we do Lord?"

Thankfully Jesus knows what we should be asking and gently steers us in the right direction. As he did with the disciples then. In the next few verses Mark records how Jesus instructed them to watch out and be on their guard. He hinted that things were going to get tough. The disciples needed to be prepared.

You could not term this passage on the end times as easy reading - it's not the nicest part of the bible to contend with. In fact I'm reminded of Private Frazer from "Dad's Army" who often pronounced "We're doomed!" And Private Jones who regularly flew into a panic as he began shouting, "Don't panic Mr Mainwaring!"

Yet midst the gloom and doom and potential panic of temples falling, nations rising up against nation, false teachers who deceive, family betrayals and arrests of God's people there is a message of hope. A message of hope that is meant for us too. We live in turbulent times - in a world with wars and oppression; fake news and false promises; persecution and discrimination; suffering and sorrow. So let's look at what Jesus says we should do, or not do. And we'll remind ourselves of some of the promises of God.

Jesus says, *"Do not be alarmed. Such things must happen."*

Much money has been made from books and films that predict the horror of the end of the world. They may be good stories but they are fiction. Only God knows what will happen, for He reigns over all. In His hands we are safe. So we are not to fly into a panic when we hear of wars and natural disasters, but should keep a clear head, remembering to trust in the word of God. That word which promises:

"The mountains and hills may crumble, but my love for you will never end." Isaiah 54: 10

Jesus says, *"You must be on your guard."*

He warns us that our faith will be challenged, by doubt and fear, questions and experiences; through persecution and intolerance. But we must keep our wits about us and fix our eyes on Jesus, our Saviour, who for our sakes endured persecution, torture and death. Hear God's promise: *"Remember that I commanded you to be strong and brave. So don't be afraid. The Lord your God will be with you everywhere you go."* Joshua 1:9

Jesus says, *"Do not worry beforehand about what to say."*

That made me laugh!! The struggle I had putting this service together. But in the end it came good (I think) as I waited on the Spirit to guide my thoughts and words. How blessed we are to have the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of truth of whom Jesus promised, *"He will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."* John 14:26

And then in verse 13 we get perhaps the most important promise of all:

Jesus says, *"the one who stands firm to the end will be saved."*

The road is rocky; the pathway narrow. But as Paul wrote to the Colossians, *"just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."* Remember too the words of David in the psalm:

"I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.

I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken."

The end times will come. We don't know when or how. But we do know that God our father loves us; Jesus our saviour lives for us; and the Holy Spirit strengthens and guides us. By the power and grace of the Trinity we can endure all things and will then receive a crown of righteousness when Jesus we meet face to face.

StF 405 – Great is the darkness

1) Great is the darkness that covers the earth,
Oppression, injustice and pain.
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,
Though many have come in Your name.
Watching while sanity dies,
Touched by the madness and lies.

Ch) Come Lord Jesus,
Come Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit we pray.
Come Lord Jesus,
Come Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit on us today.

- 2) May now Your church rise with power and love,
This glorious gospel proclaim,
In every nation salvation will come
To those who believe in Your name.
Help us bring light to this world,
That we might speed Your return.
- 3) Great celebrations on that final day,
When out of the heavens You come.
Darkness will vanish, all sorrows will end,
And rulers will bow at Your throne.
Our great commission complete,
Then face to face we shall meet.

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Reflection

When the going gets tough, what do you do? If I am frustrated or sad or worried I take myself off for a walk by the canal. Within a few minutes I can be strolling along the towpath near the Red House Cone. Maybe it's the stillness of the water, perhaps the beauty and diversity of creation or just the fact of being away from a situation for a while, but usually I find I'm able to think clearer and feel more content. My sister on the other hand, who is a deacon in the Anglican Church, has a very different "go to place". It's the kitchen, where she grabs a bag of crisps.

But my go to bible passage for troubling times is the miracle of the calming of the storm. Not so much for the reassurance that all will be well in the end but for other reasons. First, that I'm reminded that though I'm being tossed about, so are others. There were a group of friends in the boat and other people in other boats all experiencing the same thing. God gives us friends and companions along the way to support and comfort us – to share our experiences. Secondly that Jesus is in the boat too. He's not standing on the shore watching from a distance but is in the thick of it with us. Thirdly that Jesus is not afraid of what is happening. His faith in God to protect and save is secure. And fourthly, that Jesus has faith in us to cope with the things of this world, so we should be confident in this life.

We hear a retelling of this parable written by Barbara Bennet and taken from her book, "A Great Cloud of Witnesses."

As usual the day had been full. I think we were all tired, and we were glad to get into the boat and cross the lake. Even those of us who were familiar with sailing left the departure to the men whose boat it was, and sat, wrapped in cloaks and thoughts as we set off. It was a calm evening and the sun was setting in a blaze of red. Just as it disappeared a small wind ruffled the surface of the water. Not much, but enough to make me shiver. I pulled my cloak tighter, and as I did there was a great clap of thunder, as though the heavens were falling apart. The sky went black and the heavy rain began. The little boat began to toss about, the waves grew into green watery mountains, their tops covered in foam as white as snow. My stomach growled with anxiety. I know these waters. They can be treacherous in moments, dangerous when the sudden storms strike. We got up to help the sailors, who brought in the sails, and began to bail the water out of the bottom of the boat. The storm seemed to be getting fiercer, minute by minute.

All this time, Jesus was asleep in the stern of the boat; his head on a cushion. It was as if he had neither ears nor senses, and I didn't know how he could possibly sleep through this. At last when the boat was being almost swamped by the waves, I went to him and stirred him with my foot.

"What's wrong with you?" I screamed above the wind.

"Don't you care that the boat's about to sink and drown us all?"

He blinked at me, like my little son does as he's waking from sleep, not sure for a moment where he was. The lightning lit the boat, and he saw our faces, full of fear. So he stood up and sighed. He went to the side of the boat, stretched out his hand and in a commanding voice said, "Be still." At once the waves stopped heaving; the wind stopped howling; the thunder stopped roaring; the lightning stopped flashing and everything was calm. Then he turned to us, and smiled. "Where is your faith?" he said, as he sat down and leaned back on the cushions. I felt pretty ashamed, I can tell you – and the sailors could not believe what had happened. "Who is this man?" they asked, "who can command even the wind and the sea to obey him?" So we told them!

“So we told them.”

One commentary I read about the earlier passage of the end times was entitled “Shaken, not stirred” – a reference to James Bond and his favourite tipple. The title and indeed the commentary suggested that we may well be shaken but we won’t be stirred, the events we encounter won’t knock us down if we stand firm in Jesus. Great. Totally agree. But I also think that we should be stirred. Stirred into action by Jesus’s words. Particularly by a command that appears in the middle of those reassurances: Jesus says, *“The gospel must be preached to all nations.”*

Back in 2020, Joe Biden said in his victory speech in Delaware, ‘I remember as my grandpa said when I walked out of his home when I was a kid up in Scranton, he said: “Joey, keep the faith.” And our grandmother, she yelled: “No, Joey, spread it.” Spread the faith.’

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, the good news of peace and salvation, the news that the God of Israel reigns! Isaiah 52;7 (New Living Translation)

We are charged with sharing our faith. Sharing it with family, friends, colleagues, neighbours and strangers. As Methodist people we follow “Our Calling” to respond to the gospel of God’s love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission. Tell people that Jesus came to this earth as a baby to show us the love of God. Tell people that Jesus came to die on a cross to show us the forgiveness of God. Tell people that Jesus came to rise from the dead to show us the eternal life of God. As we tell others so we will be reassured that all the world is held safe in God’s keeping; that all the world will come together under the rule of Christ; and that all the world has hope in the strength and comfort of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Lord, convince us that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. **Amen.**

StF 351 – In Christ Alone

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| 1) In Christ alone my hope is found, He is my light, my strength, my song; This Cornerstone, this solid Ground, Firm through the fiercest drought and storm. What heights of love, what depths of peace, When fears are stilled, when strivings cease! My Comforter, my All in All, Here in the love of Christ I stand. | 3) There in the ground His body lay, Light of the world by darkness slain: Then bursting forth in glorious Day Up from the grave He rose again! And as He stands in victory Sin's curse has lost its grip on me, For I am His and He is mine- Bought with the precious blood of Christ. |
| 2) In Christ alone! who took on flesh, Fullness of God in helpless babe! The gift of love and righteousness, Scorned by the ones He came to save: Till on that cross as Jesus died, The wrath of God was satisfied - For every sin on Him was laid; Here in the death of Christ I live. | 4) No guilt in life, no fear in death, This is the power of Christ in me; From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny. No power of hell, no scheme of man, Can ever pluck me from His hand; Till He returns or calls me home, Here in the power of Christ I'll stand! |

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Prayer of Confession

Lord, we are human and so we scare easily; we doubt too readily; we panic unnecessarily, and we lose our footing. Forgive us for seeking answers from within ourselves instead of looking to you. Forgive us for listening to gossip and rumour instead of thinking on your word of truth. Forgive us for staying quiet when people express despair of this world instead of offering hope. Grant that we may have the courage to stand firm in your love, trusting always in your presence. **Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” Philippians 4:6

Lord, as we bring our prayers of concern for the people and places of this world, we take a moment to breathe in and inhale your presence. And we breathe out to glorify your name.

We breathe in and inhale your peace.

King of peace, we pray for all those whose lives are not peaceful – those living in war torn countries; people living in unsettled relationships; families and friends living in turmoil following knife attacks, shootings and other violent attacks on our streets.

We breathe out and thank you for organisations and communities who work to restore and maintain peace.

We breathe in and inhale your comfort.

Compassionate Lord, we bring to you all those who are troubled in body, mind and spirit, knowing that you will heal them and give them strength. We pray for all who are ill; injured; worried; grieving; lonely; depressed.

We breathe out and thank you for the promise of heaven, where you “will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things will be gone forever.” (Rev 21:4)

We breathe in and inhale your love.

Father God, we remember all those who have yet to realise how much you love them. Give us courage to speak up and share the good news of the gospel when the opportunity arises. Help us to show your love by our actions and words, thinking always of how Jesus lived his life to the glory of your name.

We breathe out and thank you for Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection show us your love.

We breathe in and inhale your justice.

Merciful God, bless all those who struggle to make themselves heard above the loud authoritative voices of this world. We ask for guidance and wisdom for world leaders; for tolerance and understanding between your children; for justice and equality for all. We pray especially for the homeless; the oppressed; the unemployed; the refugee.

We breathe out and thank you for the gift of your spirit which inspires and strengthens; comforts and leads.

We breathe in and inhale your blessing.

Gracious God, you give us so much. Thank you for your faithfulness; goodness and patience. Thank you for the joy we receive from knowing you.

We breathe out and offer you our lives in service to you. And we pray that you will accept our monetary gifts to be used to do your work here in this church, community and circuit.

We bring our prayers together as we say the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples:

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.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 67 – This, this is the God we adore

- 1) This, this is the God we adore,
Our faithful, unchangeable friend,
Whose love is as great as his power,
And neither knows measure nor end:
- 2) 'Tis Jesus, the first and the last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home;
We'll praise him for all that is past,
And trust him for all that's to come.

Joseph Hart

Blessing

Let us go from here with the love of God in our hearts; the truth of Jesus's words on our lips; and the strength of the Holy Spirit in our step. And the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. **Amen.**

¹ *Faith and worship*

² *Joy Blake, North Camp Methodist Church, Farnborough*