

Worshipping God Together : Apart
Sunday 21st November 2021 at 10.30am
Church; Physically Distanced but Spiritually United
Worship Prepared by Rev. Janine Atkinson

A Call to Worship God

Wherever you've been: Whatever you've done: Wherever you're going.
Happy or sad: Full of energy or running on empty.
Find a place of calm in the midst of trouble.
Find a moment of peace in the midst of the storm.
Find an unexpected joy as you meet God in worship.

Hymn - R&S 382: MP 93:

*Isaac Watts (1674-1748)**

Come, let us join our cheerful songs with angels round the throne;
ten thousand thousand are their tongues, but all their joys are one.

Worthy the Lamb that died, they cry, to be exalted thus:
worthy the Lamb, our lips reply, for he was slain for us.

Jesus is worthy to receive honour and power divine;
and blessings more than we can give be, Lord, for ever thine.

Let all the hosts of heaven combine with air and earth and sea,
to lift in glorious songs divine their endless praise to thee.

Let all creation join in one, to bless the sacred name
of him that sits upon the throne, and to adore the Lamb.

Approaching God in Prayer and Saying Sorry

Constant and persistent God
when everything around us seems threatened and fragile
I come to you, trusting in your goodness and mercy
because my confidence is in you.

Where beauty fades or is destroyed, your restoring work breaks in.
All that is temporary will cease, but your presence is eternal.

You are the one who is in the boat with me
when the storms of life rage and disaster threatens.
and for that I give you thanks.

Although my eyes grow dim, you see me perfectly –
darkness cannot blind you.

As I lift up my head to see your face,
I see the twinkle of love in your eyes
and the smile of recognition on your face

And I am glad, because I need your forgiving grace
because of the times I have treated your words too lightly
and withheld my helping hand too quickly when human intervention
has threatened life in abundance
even for my neighbours and friends, let alone the world.

I am glad of your Word which reminds me,
as I say sorry and commit myself to do better,
that I can turn to face you,
confident of your forgiving mercy and grace.

Thank you Lord Amen

And in the familiar words of the Lord's prayer, I pray

Our Father who art in heaven...

Bible Reading – Mark 13: 1 – 8

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' ² Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

³ When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be

accomplished?' ⁵ Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. ⁷ When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Setting the Scene – The Box

Here is a box. It's quite a plain box.

Now imagine that God is in the box.

How should we treat it?

What should we do with it?

Where should we put it?



Should we decorate it and make it look beautiful? Put it somewhere special? Guard it? Only let 'special' people near it? Pray to it? Open it? I wonder....?

In Jesus' time people thought that God could only be found, not in a box, but in the Temple.

But, being God's Son, Jesus knew differently! Jesus knew that God couldn't be confined, kept in a fine Temple any more than God can be kept in a box – a fine box or a plain box.

Yet when Jesus spoke about the Temple being ruined, the disciples would have been horrified, because ruining the Temple was a threat to the most important thing for their understanding of God. You see they believed that the Temple building was the holiest of all places. There was a 'box-like' part of the Temple known as the 'Holy of Holies', the exact place they believed God could be found, and you could only go into it if you were one of the most religious men of the Jewish faith, one of the Chief Priests.

So the Temple was the centre of all religious life, because (they believed) God lived there, and the very idea that the Temple would be destroyed was terrible. To destroy the Temple would threaten the very being of God Himself, and their whole faith would be destroyed.

But because of Jesus, we know that God can't be kept contained - *either* in a box *or* a Temple. Through the Holy Spirit, God is to be found within the most ordinary of places and people and the most difficult of situations.

It seems bizarre to imagine that destroying a Temple could destroy God any more than opening a box could (if we believed God was in there) because God can't be trapped anywhere, in fact if it were possible to put God in a box, the best thing we could do would be to open it!

Hymn - MP 445: STF 59: Graham Kendrick Copyright © 1987 Make Way Music,

Lord, the light of your love is shining
in the midst of the darkness, shining
Jesus, Light of the world, shine upon us
set us free by the truth you now bring us
shine on me, shine on me

*Shine, Jesus, shine fill this land with the Father's glory
blaze, Spirit, blaze set our hearts on fire
Flow, river, flow flood the nations with grace and mercy
send forth your word Lord, and let there be light*

Lord, I come to your awesome presence
from the shadows into your radiance
by your blood I may enter your brightness
search me, try me, consume all my darkness
shine on me, shine on me

Refrain.....

As we gaze on your kingly brightness
so our faces display your likeness
ever changing from glory to glory
mirrored here may our lives tell your story
shine on me, shine on me

Refrain.....

Psalm 16: A Prayer of Confidence

- ¹ Protect me, O God; I trust in you for safety.
- ² I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
all the good things I have come from you."
- ³ How excellent are the Lord's faithful people!
My greatest pleasure is to be with them.
- ⁴ Those who rush to other gods
bring many troubles on themselves.
I will not take part in their sacrifices;
I will not worship their gods.
- ⁵ You, Lord, are all I have, and you give me all I need;
my future is in your hands.
- ⁶ How wonderful are your gifts to me; how good they are!
- ⁷ I praise the Lord, because he guides me,
and in the night my conscience warns me.
- ⁸ I am always aware of the Lord's presence;
he is near, and nothing can shake me.
- ⁹ And so I am thankful and glad, and I feel completely secure,
¹⁰ because you protect me from the power of death.
I have served you faithfully,
and you will not abandon me to the world of the dead.
- ¹¹ You will show me the path that leads to life;
your presence fills me with joy and brings me pleasure forever.

Bible Reading – Daniel 12: 1 – 3

‘At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence.

But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. ² Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

³ Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

Reflections

Only a few pages back in Mark chapter 11, Jesus was making his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. So, the snippet you’ve just read is set between that great celebratory event and the events of what we call Maundy Thursday, when Jesus was arrested and the very next day crucified.

This incident follows on from a number of controversies in and around the Temple during that week in which Jesus has made himself unpopular with the religious authorities. Jesus posed a challenge and a threat to their whole belief system with his new-fangled, topsy-turvy ideas and ways. And they were out to get him!

Jesus was throwing a spanner in the works. I’ve said before – he hadn’t been on the *‘how to win friends and influence people in authority’* course, and he was challenging the religious authorities head on, causing a stir amongst people whose faith had been passed down through many, many generations and firmly entrenched in every facet of life.

By the time Jesus left the Temple with his disciples he had spent quite some time there, causing ructions and making insightful observations.

Now, the Temple had a reputation as the most beautiful building in the whole world – a building befitting *God's* dwelling place. The Temple was vital to the Jewish faith.

It was built by King Herod, but it was still under construction in Jesus' day. It was the largest and most imposing structure for hundreds of miles in any direction. The disciples commented on the structure and size of the Temple as they left it, heading for the Mount of Olives, from where they would be able to see the impressive scale of the Temple.

But it was more than just a beautiful place, more than just somewhere to meet, it was more than just King Herod's vanity project and more than just a place of worship. As well as being all those things, it was where *God* resided – it was the heart and the lifeblood of Judaism.

Through Mark's writing we eavesdrop on a private conversation between Jesus and just four of his Disciples; Peter, James, John and Andrew as they sat on the Mount of Olives.

These were panic ridden times and the disciples would have been wondering whatever was going to happen next after Jesus' words about not one stone of the Temple being left on another.

Remember, Israel was living under uneasy and sometimes violent occupation by the Romans, and the land was prone to earthquake, drought and famine.

The very idea of the Temple being destroyed would have seemed to them like the end of everything – their whole way of life and 'being', the end of their freedom to worship the Lord their God. Without the Temple, the stronghold of their faith, they felt they would be left vulnerable to the vagaries of other peoples and their gods.

Just as in Daniel's day, these are and will continue to be anxious times. But the writer of Daniel picks out wisdom and righteousness as the keys to triumphant living and to understanding that God is ultimately trustworthy.

Daniel offers us poetic images to help us – “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever”.

Perhaps Jesus, like the writer of Daniel is telling the Disciples to be wise, righteous and calm in the face of the events that will inevitably happen. They are not to be alarmed they are not to panic. History will continue on its regular course.

Of course, the Temple did fall in the lifetime of many of the disciples in AD70, but this event did not mark the end. Things changed though – they had to.

The Temple was impressive, but vulnerable – whereas Jesus is vulnerable to the authorities, but impressive.

You see, for Christians the Temple became redundant when Jesus was crucified and rose again! Jesus’ life... death and resurrection taught them that God could not be confined in any place, not a box, not a Temple, not a Church.

And the practice of Judaism endured despite the destruction of the Temple - it changed and evolved, but it endured.

Change is uncomfortable, and painful, always has been and always will be, just like the birth pangs Jesus refers to. But if we endure, we gain more than we lose. When change is called for, we fixate on what we will lose, instead of daring to imagine what we might gain.

In childbirth, when labour reaches ‘the transition stage’ the intensity of contractions changes, nothing seems to work, it’s all too much and the mother often feels out of control declaring that she can’t go on.

Of course, there’s no going back and what we *expect* to follow is birth, as the baby is pushed down the birth canal – it’s a rather violent event!

But the companionship of a midwife, someone who knows the ropes, as it were, and people we know and love keeping calm and not panicking ensures that endurance through change leads to new life.

Both the fall of the Temple and the imagery of birth pangs illustrate the release of the potential of God's freedom and new life into the world. There is a 'bursting out' from where they were trapped.

The pain Jesus refers to is not an end. The pain ends as new life begins.

Transitions from one state to another occur throughout our life, as human beings we experience many 'birth pangs' – leaving the familiarity of home must be bewildering for children starting nursery or school, going to school every day is a demanding change.

For someone who has lost the person they love dearly in bereavement, illness or injury, the change and disruption causes shock, anger and confusion beyond knowing. And often help is needed to enable people to work through grief. When we're immersed in distress it's hard to imagine a happy time.

But ultimately, we can grow and develop through our experiences and for each one of us the challenge is not just to go and to grow through a time of change and upheaval, but to support others who are experiencing something similar.

These strange times we are enduring can feel like 'panicky' times for the world. The everyday, 'normal' things we took for granted were denied us and, even now, are changed.

And perhaps we feel under threat in a time when all religion seems to be treated with suspicion. Perhaps we feel the responsibility of buildings and traditions that 'need' maintaining.

But Jesus tells us that despite wars and rumours of wars – many 'endings' *the end is still to come*. There's no time set for this 'end'. And

the end has not come for our Christian life of discipleship what might feel like end times can actually be a new beginning – the birth of something new.

So even now, when the world seems to be falling apart around us, Jesus offers hope to those who trust him – his Disciples, me and you. He cautions us against trusting in the security of the establishment and against leaders with empty promises.

We are to be wise and righteous and calm - we are not to panic (Captain Mainwaring!)

Change is inevitable, change will happen and change can lead (as it did for the early Christians) to fresh understandings of God as we continue to experience the companionship of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit in *our* lives, both as Church and as individuals.

Our experiences of change and transition may well feel like birth pangs, it may feel as though nothing will work, it may all seem too much and we might feel as though our future is out of control and we can't go on. But, as it was for the Christians and the Jews, whilst the end of the world might seem to have come, it may only be the end for a particular way of life – our very particular world view – perhaps a change, and not an end at all.

Change is uncomfortable, and painful – always has been and always will be, just like those birth pangs. But if we endure the change, we can gain more than we lose.

Through change, God's potential of freedom and new life are constantly re-born, released into the world as people experience God, liberated through the Holy Spirit from Temple and Church and box to be active in the world through our witness, wisdom and love.

God has not finished with us, but God is challenging us to be bold and courageous as the world and the church breathe through the birth

pangs to new birth and new life – the joyous result of the pain Jesus refers to.

I wonder, what pain are we challenged to endure in order to respond to God who requires us to understand Jesus as the 'Living' Temple, the true location of God? The Lord God, unconfineable in bricks and mortar?

Hymn – R&S 685: MP 702: N. Tate (1652-1715) and N. Brady (1659-1726) New Version, 1696; altd. Psalm 34:1-4, 7-9 para.

Through all the changing scenes of life, in trouble and in joy,
the praises of my God shall still my heart and tongue employ.

Of his deliverance I will boast, till all that are distressed
from mine example comfort take, and soothe their griefs to rest.

O magnify the Lord with me, with me exalt his name;
when in distress to him I called, he to my rescue came.

The hosts of God encamp around the dwellings of the just;
deliverance he affords to all who on his succour trust.

O make but trial of his love; experience will decide
how blest are they, and only they, who in his truth confide.

Fear him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear;
make you his service your delight, your wants shall be his care.

Holding the World in Prayer

Lord God of time and history, place and creativity,
even as the disciples admired the stones of the Temple walls
Jesus shocked them – 'All will be destroyed'.
And a few years later, all was destroyed
and the end of the world seemed to have come
for those people's way of life.

Lord I come to you in prayer as I have before
holding before you the thousands of people who feel that the end of the
world has come for their way of life.

nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.

From utmost east to utmost west, where human feet have trod,
by the voice of many messengers goes forth the voice of God:
'Give ear to me, you continents, you islands give ear to me,
that the earth may be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea'.

What can we do to work God's work, to prosper and increase
love and justice throughout the world, the reign of the Prince of Peace?
What can we do to hasten the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea?

Let us go out in the strength of God, with the banner of Christ unfurled,
that the light of the glorious gospel of truth may shine throughout the
world:

sin and sorrow let us fight to set their captives free,
that the earth may be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.

All that we do can have no worth unless God blesses the deed;
vainly we hope for the harvest-tide till God gives awakens the seed;
yet nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.

Closing Words and Blessing

As I leave this time of worship, I will not take leave of God.
God goes before me into the streets and homes of my community
waiting to meet me where human need is greatest.

I place my trust in God who sustains me
through every change and challenge.

And I pray that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
will be with us all evermore. Amen

Image:- Cardboard Box – www.pixabay.com free images

Hymn words reproduced under the CCLI Licence numbers of the SPACE Group of Churches: 181588 - Grove URC: 178113 - The URC Heckmondwike: 177949 - Longcauseway Church: 1236906 - Norristhorpe URC: 783508 - Ravensthorpe with Hopton URC