

SERVICE OF WORSHIP

Sunday 5th of April, 2020

Let us worship God, let us pray:

Almighty God, you have spoken to your people down the generations and you became one of us in and through your Son Jesus Christ and you continue to dwell within us through your Holy Spirit.

Therefore, gracious God, we turn to you now during this time of worship to offer our thanks and praise and to seek your guidance and your strength.

Lord God, we desire to come before you in heart and mind and soul. Help us to be still in your presence and so may we live in you and you in us.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

HYMN

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear,
And Grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that Grace appear
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come.
'Tis Grace hath brought me safe thus far
And Grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me.
His Word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we've first begun.

BIBLE READING

Psalm 77

God's Mighty Deeds Recalled

1I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, that he may hear me.
2In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted.
3I think of God, and I moan;
I meditate, and my spirit faints.
4You keep my eyelids from closing;
I am so troubled that I cannot speak.
5I consider the days of old,
and remember the years of long ago.
6I commune with my heart in the night;
I meditate and search my spirit:
7“Will the Lord spurn forever,
and never again be favourable?
8Has his steadfast love ceased forever?
Are his promises at an end for all time?
9Has God forgotten to be gracious?
Has he in anger shut up his compassion?”
10And I say, “It is my grief
that the right hand of the Most High has changed.”
11I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD;
I will remember your wonders of old.
12I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds.
13Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is so great as our God?
14You are the God who works wonders;
you have displayed your might among the peoples.
15With your strong arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.
16When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
the very deep trembled.
17The clouds poured out water;
the skies thundered;
your arrows flashed on every side.
18The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;

your lightnings lit up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.
19Your way was through the sea,
your path, through the mighty waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.
20You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron

MESSAGE

I was listening to a phone-in programme on the radio a few days ago and one member of the public who rang in said that he was a Christian but was finding the current situation surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak a challenge to his faith. “I keep asking myself where is God? Why isn’t he helping?” was his comment.

Perhaps you are asking similar questions? There are some Christians whose spiritual skies are always blue and whose vision of God is always clear. There are others, however, who find that situations such as we are facing, cause them to have doubts and to seek for answers. Perhaps you are amongst them. If so, do not be ashamed or upset, because you are in good company. Some of the greatest Christians have had periods of doubt and spiritual depression.

Think of John the Baptist. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus says that “*amongst those born of women none is greater than John*” and that John was “*more than a prophet*” (see Luke 7:24-35). It was John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus and who baptised Jesus. John said this about Jesus: “*one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals*” (Luke 3:16). And yet, after John was arrested, he sent his followers to speak with Jesus and ask him this question: “*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*”. So, it appears that even John the Baptist, at one low point in his life, was seeking confirmation that Jesus was the Messiah. He wasn’t certain; he had his questions. Jesus sent the followers back to John with the reassuring message that the love of God was indeed powerfully at work in Jesus’ ministry (Luke 7:22).

We can think of Jesus himself. He had his spiritual high points. For example, after his baptism he heard a voice from heaven declaring: “*You*

are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). His healing and miracles were a high spiritual point, as was his triumphant approach to Jerusalem which we remember each Palm Sunday. However, if Jesus had his spiritual high points, he also had his spiritual lows. For example, not long after that triumphant approach to Jerusalem, Jesus is to be found in the Garden of Gethsemane praying and feeling such deep anxiety that he sweated blood. Finally, of course, we hear the cry from the Cross: *“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me”* (Mark 15:34). Can there be a greater spiritual low than feeling that we have been abandoned by God?

So, I have tried to show that even the greatest can experience periods of doubt; spiritual low points. The important question now for us to address is how can WE cope with such periods, such feelings, if and when they come to us? And this is where we can turn to Psalm 77 for our answer.

The author of Psalm 77 knows what it is to feel spiritually low and to wonder where God is in the situation he is facing: *“I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me....Will the Lord spurn forever and never again be favourable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has he forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?”* (verses 1 & 7-9).

However, despite such sentiments, the author of the Psalm is wise enough to realise that these feelings are not the norm for him; he is, if you like, going through a spiritual bad patch. His fears, his doubts, his depression will pass. Understanding this helps him a lot.

Joseph Parker was an English Congregational minister and a very popular preacher in the 19th Century. The City Temple in London was built to accommodate those who wanted to listen to him preach. He could, apparently, be a rather tempestuous individual and there is a story that one Sunday evening he returned from a service having had a very heated quarrel with some of his church officers. He flopped down into his chair and asked his wife to bring him a pen and some paper so that he could write out a resignation letter immediately. She returned instead with a smile and a cup of coffee. She was wise, she realised that her husband was not in his normal frame of mind, he was upset and angry. He was not

capable of thinking straight. It was a bad patch from which he would emerge.

This is also what the author of Psalm 77 realised. He understood that he would pass through his period of spiritual darkness and doubt and emerge into the glorious dawn with faith renewed and hope restored. And how would this happen? Quite simply by remembering how God had blessed him and helped him in the past. If he couldn't see God at work in the present, then he would remember how God had been at work in his life in days gone by: *"I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old"* (verse 11 following).

The psalmist moves from distress to joy, as he reflects on the great acts of God in the past. In the midst of his present distress, the psalmist looks to the past and finds strength for the present and hope for the future.

We too, as Christian men and women, can look to God's past acts as we navigate our present struggles. There are things that happen which can cause even the most committed Christian to ask 'Why?'. Tragedies in our own life and events which happen in our community and world- such as this current coronavirus pandemic- cause many of us to have periods of doubt; our faith falters momentarily. This is when we need to remember how our faith has helped us in the past; how God was our strength in days gone by and how he will be our strength in the days to come.

For my own part, I also see God very much at work in the kindnesses people show. Think how many people are going out of their way to help others at this time. Think of the members of our NHS who are putting their lives on the line to care for people who are sick. I believe God is to be seen at work in and through people like these. God is not distant, he is in the person who drops off your shopping because you cannot go out, he is in the nurse who cares for you, he is in the police and the fire brigade and the army and the First Responders and all the emergency services who are doing what they can to keep us safe.

And so, if we remember God's blessings to us in the past and if we have eyes to see him in the present in the people who care about us and help us, then no longer will we be at the mercy of our moods and our

circumstances, instead we will be able to say, as John Bunyan said of his pilgrim long ago: *“One here will constant be, come wind, come weather”*.

In the name of Jesus Christ and to the glory of God, Amen.

PRAYER

Eternal God, we come before you now in prayer, acknowledging that there is so much we do not understand and many things we are uncertain about. There are times when life seems a mystery and events confuse and trouble us so that our trust is undermined and our confidence shaken.

At such times we recall the promise of Jesus Christ that he will be with us always and through everything until the end of time. We experience the fulfilment of this promise through the living presence of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever storms may descend upon us, whatever the trials we may face, we gain strength from knowing you are with us, meeting us in our fear to quieten our hearts.

We know, God, that you are at work in our world; we believe in the final victory of your purpose. And so, when we cannot make sense of the events that befall us, help us to hold on to you knowing that you hold on to us.

Reassure us, God, that doubts and questions are often part of faith and that they are able to lead us into a deeper understanding of your purpose. May we be courageous in being honest with you and honest with ourselves. Teach us to bring our faith and our doubt before you, confident that you can use both.

Father God, we know that there are no easy answers to the harsh realities of life, no simplistic explanation about why suffering continues. But we believe that the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ shows that your love cannot be defeated nor your purpose be denied. In the end may this truth turn our fears into hope and our doubts into faith.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

“Our Father, who art in heaven.....”

HYMN

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not;
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be.

[Chorus]

Great is Thy faithfulness!
Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided;
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

[Chorus]

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

[Chorus]

BLESSING

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, Amen.
