

Wednesday Worship

13th May 2020

Introduction

Let everything be said and done in the name of the Lord Jesus,
All **giving thanks to God through Jesus Christ.**

Sing psalms, hymns and sacred songs:
All **let us sing to God with thankful hearts.**

Open our lips, Lord:
All **and we shall praise your name.**

To God the Father, who created the world;
to God the Son, who redeemed the world;
to God, the Holy Spirit, who sustains the world;
be all praise and glory, now and for ever.
All **Amen.**

Today our focus is on the life of faith. The faith that saves us by grace without putting heavy burdens on us, as we will hear about in our first reading, and the faith that sustains us and helps us to grow through the power of God working within us, as we will hear about in our second reading.

Hymn: *Be still, for the presence of the Lord*

Opening prayers and lighting of a candle

Lord, awaken us to your glory.
Dispel the darkness of night.
All **Awaken us to your glory.**
Destroy our heaviness of heart.
All **Awaken us to your glory.**
Cure the blindness of our sight.
All **Awaken us to your glory.**

Heal the deafness of our ears.
All **Awaken us to your glory.**
Open the mouth that is dumb.
All **Awaken us to your glory.**
Restore a gentleness of touch.
All **Awaken us to your glory.**
Encourage in us a sense of adventure.
All **Awaken us to your glory.**
Bring us an awareness of you.
All **Awaken us to your glory.**

1st Reading: Acts 15.1-21

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

"After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will set it up,
so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.

Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago."

Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.'

Prayer of response

Lord, we so often try to put heavy burdens on one another,
telling others how people they should speak or act or look.
Yet, we ourselves cannot always live up to such standards.
Forgive us when we load people with guilt and condemnation
instead of freeing them with love and forgiveness
and gently helping them to find the right path.
Help us to remember that your will is to save,
not to condemn,
and that your yoke is easy and your burden is light.

All **Amen.**

Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me,
‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’
Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.
To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.
For there the thrones for judgement were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
‘May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.’
For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’
For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.

Prayer of response

Lord, as we read this psalm
we are reminded that we cannot worship as we used to.
We are separated and scattered
and do not know when we will be back
in our church buildings.

Help us to remember, though, Lord,
that, wherever we go or cannot go,
you are with us, and we are at home with you.
And although we may not physically see
our sisters and brothers,
we are still joined in faith and love.

All **Amen.**

2nd Reading: John 15.1-17

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Hymn: A new commandment

Reflection

A rabbi asked his students, 'How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?'

One of his students suggested, 'When from a distance you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep'.

'No', was the answer of the rabbi.

'Is it when one can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?' asked a second student.

'No', said the rabbi.

'Please tell us the answer then', said the students.

'It is', said the wise teacher, 'when you can look into the face of human beings and you have enough light in you to recognise them as your brothers and sisters. Up until then it is night, and darkness is still with us'.

In our first reading from Acts we see an example of the Early Church having enough light in them to see non-Jewish believers as their brothers and sisters. Disputes and divisions arose very early on in the life of the Church, and there was no one unified way of doing things, just as churches now all vary from one another. Sometimes such variation is not a problem

but the issue in Acts was a big one. Did non-Jews have to become Jewish in order to follow Jesus, and be subject to Jewish law? Or are all saved by having faith in Jesus?

As we know, the apostles and elders came down on the side of faith in Jesus, recognising that God was pouring out his blessings on Jews and non-Jews alike, and making his saving grace available to all without distinction. This wasn't entirely radical – the great heroes of the Jewish faith were all saved by faith, from Abel onwards, as we hear about in Hebrews 11. But the issue turned on the question of whether God's salvation in Christ was available only to those who kept the Jewish law or if it was freely available to all who believed. And it was decided that salvation was available to all who believed – in other words, the apostles and elders of the Church had enough of the light of faith in them to see what God was doing among the non-Jews and to recognise that they too were brothers and sisters in Christ.

But what does it actually mean to be saved by faith? Does it mean that we can just decide that we believe in Jesus and then just carry on as we were before? I don't believe it does. Faith has to be more than just words if it is to have any meaning or impact at all. Our salvation doesn't depend on keeping all the rules perfectly, but it does call on us to follow Jesus, live in him, grow in him, and do his will. Not because we are forced to but because our love and faith draw us that way.

In our second reading, from John's Gospel, Jesus described himself as the true vine and us as branches, saying:

*“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.
John 15.4-5 (NRSVA)*

In these words from John's Gospel we see Jesus comparing the life of faith to being part of a living, growing plant that produces fruit. Jesus calls us to be part of what he's doing in the world and gives us the power and ability to change, flourish and produce fruit. He sustains us, makes growth possible and is the source of change and growth in our lives.

So, our calling to live as people of faith is two-fold: First, we are called to acknowledge our dependence on God for salvation and to trust in him for everything rather than our own efforts, even and especially when things are difficult and uncertain as they are at the moment. Second, we are called to grow towards being the people we are meant to be, loving God and our neighbour, and seeing all people as our brothers and sisters in the light of our faith. This may mean that we look out for others by offering practical or emotional help, or simply that we do what we can to help slow the spread of the coronavirus by staying indoors, which is in itself an act of love.

So, let us pray that God will give us faith to trust in him and a desire to live that faith out in our everyday lives, in all the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Amen.

Prayers

We pray for strength to follow Jesus.
Saviour, we hear your call.

All **Help us to follow.**

Jesus said: 'Whoever wishes to be great among you
must be your servant'.
Lord, we ask you to open our hearts to the needs of others,
especially the isolated, the ill and those anxious about the future.
We thank you for the ways
in which people have come together
during this coronavirus pandemic
and we pray that we will remain a more caring society
when it is over.
Saviour, we hear your call.

All **Help us to follow.**

Jesus said: 'Unless you change and become humble
like little children,
you can never enter the kingdom of heaven'.
Lord, we ask you to increase our trust and dependence
on you,
in times of both sorrow and joy.
Saviour, we hear your call.

All **Help us to follow.**

Jesus said: 'Be merciful as your Father is merciful;
love your enemies and do good to them'.
Forgive us, Lord, when we hold onto grudges
and refuse to forgive others when they come to us.
Heal the divisions between and within nations and peoples
and bring us your peace.
Saviour, we hear your call.

All **Help us to follow.**

Jesus said: 'Love one another, as I love you;
there is no greater love than this,
to lay down your life for your friends'.
We give thanks for those who put themselves at risk for us:
doctors, nurses, care workers, pharmacists, delivery drivers,
postal workers, shop workers and the emergency services.
Help us to be ready to serve as you call us.
Saviour, we hear your call.

All **Help us to follow.**

Jesus said: 'I am the resurrection and the life'.
Be with those who are ill and protect them under your wings.
Strengthen them and those who care for them.
Comfort and uphold the depressed and anxious.
And we commend to your love and mercy
those who have passed through this life.

Saviour, we hear your call.
All **Help us to follow.**

God of mercy,
All **you know us and love us
and hear our prayer:
keep us in the eternal fellowship
of Jesus Christ our Saviour.**
All **Amen.**

Let us pray with confidence as our Saviour has taught us
All **Our Father, which art in heaven...**

Hymn: Father, I place into your hands

Closing prayers

Jesus, lord of time,
All **hold us in your eternity.**
Jesus, image of God,
All **travel with us the life of faith.**
Jesus, friend of sinners,
All **heal the brokenness of our world.**
Jesus, lord of tomorrow,
All **draw us into your future.**
Amen.

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;
and the blessing...
All **Amen.**

Let us bless the Lord;
All **thanks be to God.**