

Sunday 18th October 2020

Opening Prayer

To You we rise, in You we rest
We stay at home, we go on quest,
Still You are our abode (from H and P 39, v5 alt.)

Hymn: StF 608 MP 19 All Praise to our redeeming Lord who joins us by His grace

Prayer of Approach

Heart-stirring God,
You know each of us by name
and day by day we discover your favour afresh.
Your love is new every morning.
Your Presence remains with us,
whether we are called to travel or need to stay put.
You are our rest-giver and the source of our peace.

We marvel that you choose to be gracious to us.
We are touched and humbled by the mercy You extend.
We ask You to stir our hearts and teach us Your ways so that we who belong to You may know more of You.
Show us Your glory.
Open our eyes to it, stretching in beauty over the face of the earth,
shining in the face of Christ Jesus and smiling in the faces of every life lighted by Your Spirit,
so that we and all Your people may give You glory and worship You in Spirit and in Truth.

Amen (prayer inspired by Exodus 33 vv. 12-23)

Prayer of Confession

(You can begin this prayer with your hands held shut)

Giving and forgiving God, You are rich in mercy and generous to all.
Help us to see clearly the priorities, prejudices and anxieties in our lives.

Help us to face honestly the injustice, greed and exploitation of the society in which we live.

Forgive us when our concerns have been limited and we have behaved as if our lives and resources were ours to use as we wished.

Forgive us when we have failed to let Your big-heartedness open our hearts and hands.

(Open your hands)

Merciful God, give us the grace and courage to open our hearts and hands.

Shape our lives and use us for we belong to You.

Amen

Assurance of Forgiveness

Receive the riches of God's mercy and grace.

Know beyond any doubt that You are loved and forgiven in Jesus

Today's Reading from the Old Testament

Exodus 33 vv. 12-23

Today's Epistle Reading

I Thessalonians 1 vv. 1-10

Today's Gospel Reading

Matthew 22 vv. 15-22

Time to Reflect

There have been times in the past months, in those moments between sleeping and waking, where I have 'come to' and then remembered 'yes, we are still here, in the middle of the pandemic'. Like everyone who thought they had 'a settled life', I find myself continually adjusting to new levels of uncertainty, and expectations which have changed so much. Often all we can know is that another day starts and we are still 'here, in the middle' and we do not know how or when this 'new normal' will end.

This is a strangely interim life, fluid and marked by waiting, stuck in what is sometimes described as the 'messy middle'. It may have been like too for the early Christians Paul wrote to at Thessalonica. His letter offers testimony to the extraordinary dynamism of early Christianity. Probably written within twenty years of the Crucifixion it presents a recognisable picture of established church life. But these Christians are keenly

conscious that they are living 'in the middle' between God's great act of rescue and their eternal hope. In the midst of persecution and bereavement they may well have felt stretched and disorientated. The Gospel passage gives us the feeling of 'coming in in the middle', as if we had walked into a room in the middle of a conversation or turned on a television or radio in the middle of a drama. Whether it was right to pay taxes to the Romans was a long-running debate on which many took entrenched positions. It is a clever and dangerous 'trick question' because a direct answer lays Jesus open to charges of collaboration or revolution.

Matthew shows us Jesus taking and holding the coin, perhaps turning it over in His hand, studying the image of the Emperor, reading the imperial titles with their grandiose claims. In the hands of Jesus, a new perspective emerges and tense political and ethical question is seen in a new light. The principle is the priority of God, the need to render God what is due. The question of 'what is owed' to Caesar is addressed to the questioners. What new perspectives on entrenched issues and problems might Jesus open for us when we turn them over and put them in His hands?

To those Thessalonians picking their way through the 'messy middle', Paul's words were surely hugely encouraging. He shares how he thanks God for them in his prayers. He observes how their genuine faith and change of priorities was apparent to him and all the churches. When we think about how we support each other as Christians, we often focus on giving kindly advice or practical help. Paul shows us that one of the most affirming and valuable things we can do is to point out signs of God's presence in their lives. Paul is like a field officer, actively searching for and affirming signs that the Spirit is at work in these new churches. Moses told God that he didn't want to go on another step, didn't want to budge, unless assured of continuing God's presence (Exodus 33 vv. 15-16). With joy Paul discovers such signs of God's Presence bringing renewal and change in the lives of his fellow Christians and it brings him to his knees in thankful joy. May God open our eyes and hearts so we like Paul can start our own scavenger hunt for signs of God's presence and offer words of encouragement and affirmation, and prayers of thanks.

Take a time to sit quietly

Think of Jesus giving attention to a tricky situation where you do not know how to speak or act for the best. Pray that as you put this into Jesus's hands you will receive a renewed perspective.

In the 'messy middle' what would it mean to embark on a scavenger hunt for signs of God's Presence? Give thanks for someone in whose life you see God at work. Is there a way you could encourage them by letting them know?

A time of prayer

Patient God

Help us to remember that we can't find the words, You listen to our hearts and Your Spirit pleads for us in sighs too deep to be spoken.

Lover of Justice, we hold before You the peoples of the world. Establish equity and grant wisdom.

Strong God, we hold before You the church through the world and our own churches. Strengthen hearts and renew vision.

Merciful one, we hold before You those we know in need. Reach out with healing and restoration, encircle in comfort and care.

Listening God, refresh our sense of Your Presence and strengthen and guide us day by day, until with all Your beloved people we see You face to face in Your Kingdom.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father

Hymn: StF 615 Let Love be real or sing a verse of a hymn that comes to mind

A prayer of blessing

May God our Father inspire and strengthen us in our work of faith

May Christ Jesus our brother motivate and sustain us in our labour of love

May the Spirit our helper establish and build in us a steadfast hope.

That our living may be a reason for thanksgiving and bring Glory to God.

Amen.

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