



Service for Private or Personal Use – Sunday 17th May 2020

Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard,
who has kept our soul among the living and has not let our feet slip.

[Psalm 66 v8, 9]

We pause for a moment and reflect. Verses 8 to 20 of this Psalm were set for today, and the words seem very appropriate in these present circumstances. We are thankful that God has “kept our soul among the living” (though we remember thousands grieving for those who have died).

Many of us clap each Thursday for Health-Care workers: their praise is deserved, and heard. How much more should “the sound of God’s praise be heard”.

Hymn: *All things praise thee, Lord most high* (H&P 331, MP 24) or

For the music of creation (StF 74) or choose another hymn of worship, perhaps one that focuses on God’s glory in creation.

Prayer

This wonderful world, O God, displays your handiwork. In wisdom you created all things. In love you continue to preserve the world and all creatures. Patiently you long for us to turn to you, to love you in some faint reflection of your far greater love for us.

As a saint said so many years ago, you have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you. That homesickness of the heart prompts us to turn again to you. ‘From the best bliss that earth imparts we turn, unfilled, to you again.’

Although you are the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity and whose name is holy, you have promised to dwell with those who are of a humble and contrite spirit. Draw near to us now as we worship. Give us, we pray, that spirit of awe in your presence, that keeps fresh in our minds how great you really are, and what a stunning privilege it is that you should make our hearts your permanent home.

Cleanse them, we pray; make them fit places to welcome you. May they be places in which no corner is unfit for you to see, nor any voice allowed to drown out the whisper of your love or the call to action.

As we spend this time with you, and share it with our brothers and sisters in Christ, may we find refreshment and inspiration, drawing deeply from the wells of salvation and catching glimpses of your glory.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Bible Reading: John chapter 14 verses 15 to 21

- Which verse in this short passage means most to you? Why?
- Jesus promised to send “Another Helper” (a better translation than the Authorised Version’s “Comforter”). In what part of your life do you need that sort of help?
- The Holy Spirit “dwells with you and will be in you.” How do we see and experience this?

- Why, in verse 21, is keeping Jesus's commandments described as the same as loving him, and being loved by him?

Hymn: *Spirit of the living God* (H&P 295, StF 395, MP 613) or choose another hymn that asks for the Holy Spirit to work in you.

Bible Reading: Acts chapter 17 verses 22 to 31

Paul is in Athens, the 'Oxford and Cambridge' of the ancient world (apologies to staff at Leeds University who are using this service!). It was the famous centre of learning and thinking, where the brightest minds discussed and debated every new idea. So when Paul turned up and began preaching the Gospel, they wanted to know more – possibly out of curiosity rather than a genuine desire for commitment. In verse 18 we find some of the philosophers wanting to know what he was trying to teach, as a "preacher of foreign gods."

Who were these "foreign gods?" One was called Jesus, and the other – apparently – 'Resurrection'! It's the word closely resembling the name 'Anastasia' or 'Natascha'.

Would some stranger who wandered into our services find we make as much emphasis on Jesus and Resurrection that they would make the same mistake?

Our reading is Luke's summary of what Paul said in reply. It's too brief to be the whole of his reply. It is more like a set of bullet-points (or sermon notes). Bishop Taylor Smith was Chaplain-General during the First World War. When men applied to become chaplains he often asked them what they would say to a dying soldier who only had a few minutes to live. Could they put across the gospel simply and briefly?

*Have you ever been asked to explain **what** you believe, and **why** you believe it? What would you say if you are asked tomorrow? Where do 'Jesus' and 'the Resurrection' feature in your reply?*

We were told in verse 16 that it was the Epicurean and the Stoic philosophers who debated with Paul. In his reply Paul challenges some of their beliefs, but does so respectfully, as we shall see. The Epicureans did not think it was necessary to actively seek God, because the gods took no interest in people. They did not believe in divine judgment. The Stoics believed that everything was God (or god): they were 'pantheists.' Knowing this little bit about their beliefs helps us see what Paul was challenging as he spoke.

Although he will challenge their beliefs, and point out the lack of logic or consistency in them, he speaks respectfully to them. Rudeness rarely wins an argument, and never wins a friend. He found an immediate point of contact in the inscription he had noticed on an altar: 'To an Unknown God.' To the Athenians this was an insurance policy, in case they had overlooked some god, who would be offended and then punish them. They collected gods like some people collect souvenirs or pictures or CDs or... well, they had a big collection, and they didn't want to leave any out. No wonder Paul told them that they were "in every way very religious" – the old translation of "too superstitious" gives the wrong impression.

The situation Paul faced has suddenly become up-to-date, hasn't it? While few people think of bowing down to an idol, they betray the spirit of idolatry. Fingers crossed. Unlucky thirteen. Wearing a cross, but never thinking of the Son of God who was crucified. Rushing through the Lord's Prayer at the end of the day, without any sense of talking to our Father in Heaven. Aren't these little better than superstition or

idolatry? The priority we give to – shall we say – a favourite TV programme, or our football team (when they are free to play again), or a Pop Idol (interesting name!)... I am sure you can give more examples. Can we really pretend that idolatry is a thing of the past?

If Paul turned up tomorrow, where would he pin-point the signs that our generation is “very religious?”

No; I am not referring to our neighbours of other faiths. What about those many who would say, “I suppose I’m a Christian.” But if you ask them why they think that, what then? Baptized? So were Hitler and Stalin. Born in a Christian country? So were many of our Muslim and Hindu neighbours, who would be offended if told that made them Christian. Believe in God and try to keep the Ten Commandments? So do our Jewish neighbours. Give regularly to charity? So do many people of no faith. I would be astonished if you did not know people of other faiths who are genuinely good people, sincere and generous.

Paul did not call into question the sincerity or the devotion of the people of Athens. But is it enough? Go to the Pharmacy and ask for some medicine. Tell them you don’t mind what it is – any medicine will do, provided you are sincere. Go to the Railway station and get on a train. It doesn’t matter where it is going, provided you are sincere. Friends, that is obvious stupidity. Of course it matters. You want to be cured, not poisoned. You want to get to the right destination, not lost miles away.

Paul didn’t mock them. He pointed them to the evidence.

God as Creator of everything cannot be confined to a building in self-isolation. That’s one reason we can still worship when our churches are closed. “The highest heaven cannot contain you,” prayed Solomon in 1st Kings 8 v27, “how much less this house which I have built.” He does not depend on us for anything: in Psalm 50 God explains that he doesn’t need sacrifices – “If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.” The amazing thing is that this great and wonderful God wants us to seek him: “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.” (Isaiah 55 v6) notice how this challenges the Epicureans.

God as Sustainer of all life is the one who gives life and breath to everything. He made the one human race to be united, and to find him. He is close by, and Paul quotes two Greek poets in verse 28; he appeals to the culture that his hearers already know, to confirm his truth. It is part of his respect for his hearers. But if we are God’s children, how could we be satisfied with mere idols? How can they support us, or guide us, or save us?

God as Judge of all graciously sets aside the errors we made in ignorance. Today we are called to repent – to turn away from what we now know to be mistaken. The life of Jesus stands as a rebuke to all my failure to live by what I claim to believe. His purity and the consistency of his life and teaching expose the shabby compromises and evasions of my life. And God will judge us by that bench-mark. He vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead.

And that’s where we came in.

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God,
you are always more ready to hear than we are to pray,
and give more than either we desire or deserve.

Pour down upon us the abundance of your mercy,
forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid
and giving us those good things which we are not worthy to ask
save through the merits and mediation
of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Loving Father, in whom we live and move and have our being, I begin in repentance. I am quick to notice the failings of others, and to excuse my own faults. I may be “very religious,” yet fail to follow Christ. I presume that I am in your favour, but less charitable about other people.

Others also live and move and have their being in you. I remember them and their needs. Though they may fail to recognize you or acknowledge you, they are loved by you and need you too. There are the medical professionals, and other staff in hospitals and surgeries and pharmacies. There are ambulance drivers and other emergency services. Shop workers and public transport are vital to so many. I pray that as they play their part in your work, may they be blessed, protected and strengthened.

As Christian Aid Week ends, I remember that some needs have been forgotten in the difficult times we have faced in this country. I pray for those people who cry out for food, for clean water, for proper sanitation and education. I pray for those who suffer persecution and those who seek a better life elsewhere.

I pray for my family and friends; for those I can make easy contact with, and those from whom I am separated. Especially I pray for those who are struggling in health or mental well-being while restrictions are in place, for the lonely and the grieving. May they know your nearness and your loving care.

I bring my prayer, in the same way as I offer myself, in the name of Jesus Christ my Lord.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: *Hail, thou once-despised Jesus* (H&P 222, StF 301, MP 203)

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

Next week's Bible readings

John chapter 17 verses 1 to 11

Acts chapter 1 verses 6 to 14

Psalms 68 verses 1 to 10 and 32 to 35

1st Peter chapter 4 verses 12 to 14, and chapter 5 verses 6 to 11