



Hymn STF 21 “Born in song!”

Prayer

Loving God, we turn to you in prayer. We may be at home rather than in church but we can feel your presence. Help us to sense the reality of your presence with us.

We come to you in wonder and praise. You are beyond what our minds can imagine or fully understand but we constantly experience your love. We have received so much from you that our hearts are filled with love and gratitude. We think on your many gifts to us and are grateful. Help us to express our thanks.

We are aware that we often take your gifts for granted. We forget to be grateful and regard your gifts as ours by right. Forgive us those times when we have used your gifts selfishly or in the wrong way. Help us to be truly grateful and to show our thanks in all that we do and in all that we say. Amen.

Reading: Romans 12:9-21

This is not so much about what we do as it is about what God in his grace does in us. We are to look to God, love like God, leave everything to God, live together in the grace of God. Our relationship with others is to reveal God’s relationship with us.

Hymn STF 545 “Be thou my vision”

Reading: Matthew 16:21-28

A rather self-important man was waiting in the hospital waiting room and beginning to get rather impatient. Unwilling to wait any longer he barged in and demanded to be seen by the doctor. He shouted out “Don’t you know who I am?” The secretary calmly pressed the button on the loudspeaker system and asked the waiting patients “I have a gentleman here who doesn’t know who he is. Can someone please help him to find out? Thank you.”

The events that happened at Caesarea Philippi are often seen as a crucial point in the gospel story, it has been called the turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Before then the gospel writers tell us about a series of healings and miracles, we see Jesus teaching his disciples and sometimes great crowds of people. These events produced complete amazement in the onlookers. People keep asking the question “Who is he?” “Who is this man who teaches with such authority and has such amazing power?” The gospel writers raise the question for their readers to face.

Then after Caesarea Philippi the mood changes noticeably, the atmosphere darkens, the cross starts to loom very large in the background. Jesus starts to talk openly about his suffering and his death, he teaches about the suffering Messiah. This passage from Matthew’s gospel tells us of the first time Jesus spoke to his disciples about who he was and what would happen to him.

After Peter’s declaration Jesus goes on to give his disciples some new teaching. He taught them that the way for him was the way of suffering and death. The disciples found that very hard to accept and we can understand why. They wanted to protect their teacher and friend, that’s quite natural, we do want to protect our friends and family from harm. But sometimes we can be overprotective, we may sometimes try to keep someone from a difficult experience that would help them to grow and mature as a person.

Jesus is the Messiah, but he needed to teach the disciples what that really meant. He wasn’t called to lead the Jewish armies in battle, his role was very different. His way wasn’t attack, but non-resistance. When they came to arrest him he didn’t fight back. His way was the way of total obedience to God in all things, his way was the way of self-denial, the way that would lead to suffering and death on the cross. Jesus teaches that he must suffer and he also warns his followers and disciples that they will suffer too.

The disciples didn't fancy that at all, which isn't surprising. But Jesus was always very honest, he didn't get people to follow him under false pretences, he told them what lay ahead. It isn't easy being a Christian and Jesus never said that it would be. There is an old Arab proverb "Continual sunshine makes a desert." Jesus talks about taking up the cross, a phrase that has entered common usage. It's a phrase we hear people use at times, and sometimes we use it much too easily, much too glibly. We talk about an illness or an awkward or demanding person as being our little cross to bear. That's not really what Jesus was talking about.

We need to think what the cross meant to Jesus. The way of the cross for Jesus was the way of complete obedience to God. Jesus didn't want to suffer, he didn't want to die, but he did so in obedience to God, because that was God's will. The cross which each of us is called to bear is one of self-denial, it's about living our lives in complete obedience to God.

What that means in practice will be different for each one of us. For some it has meant suffering. I read recently how in June 1803 five Methodists in the Queens Regiment were courtmartialled at Gibraltar for attending Methodist services. Two corporals were reduced to the ranks and given 200 lashes each. There are many stories of those who have heroically faced up to great suffering for their faith, and we have heard of those who have given their lives for their faith. Indeed more people gave their lives for their faith in the twentieth century than in all the preceding centuries put together.

But most of us aren't called to be heroes or martyrs. So what does it mean to us, in our context, in our lives. Living our lives in obedience to God means putting God first. As Christians we are called to the way of self-denial. Leonard Bernstein was once asked what is the hardest instrument to play. He said without hesitation "Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists, but to find people who play second violin or second fiddle with as much enthusiasm, that's a problem."

As Christians we are called not to worry about coming first. It is when we are free from the need to put ourselves first that we find what life is truly about. We may find that being a Christian involves making a sacrifice, we may find that it involves us in great inconvenience or discomfort. But we do know that we are never asked to face anything Jesus wouldn't face and we also know that in all things he is with us and will never leave us.

Prayers

Let us pray for those who suffer because of the actions of others. We think of those who live under unjust governments and rulers. We think of those who are unable to express their opinions or beliefs for fear of the consequences.

Let us pray for those who suffer because of the selfishness of others. We think of those who have little to eat or drink when others have too much. We think of those who are neglected because others have no time to care for them.

Let us pray for those who suffer because of their own behaviour and actions. We think of those who are weighed down by feelings of guilt and regret. We think of those who long for forgiveness and a fresh start.

Let us pray for those who suffer for their faith. We think of those who have remained faithful in even the most difficult of circumstances. We think of those who are following the way of Christ even as it leads to the cross. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Hymn STF 673 "Will you come and follow me"

Blessing

May the Lord bless you and protect you.

May the Lord smile on you and show you his favour.

May the Lord befriend you and prosper you.