

Sunday 16th August 2020
A Sermon by the Rev Sandy Gunn
Based on a Reading from the Lectionary

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them,
because they were harassed and helpless,
like sheep without a shepherd.” Matthew 9

Opening prayer.

O God we come to You
because You first came to us.

We say “thank You” that we can love You
because You first loved us

And when we often feel harassed and helpless in our world situation
we have the ongoing sure and certain hope based on Your love.

Forgive us, that so often we limit You
by the smallness of our minds
by the shallowness of our faith and
by the distractions of other things.

We say “Thank you” that with Your promise of pardon
there is the promise of Your presence to be with us
and Your power within us.

Help us today to catch a glimpse of Your plan for the world
and Your purpose for our lives,
that we may not be just readers of a piece of paper
nor spectators in front of a TV or computer,
but that today we may realised that we are involved.

May we see You more clearly,
love You more dearly and
follow You more nearly.

because we pray and study in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Isaiah chapter 56 verses 1 and ,6-8

Thus says the LORD:

“Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him,
to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings
and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

Sermon : House of Prayer

We live in changing times ! I went into the bank last week ... and had to wear a facemask. If I had worn a mask going into the bank last year, I would have been arrested !

And next year ... ? With some of the “props of normal life” removed as a result of Covid-19, many are aware of the uncertainties of our bewildering situation.

Changing times with all their uncertainties is the background to Isaiah. We have become used to seeing pictures of towns devastated by war or the explosion in Beirut. After the devastation of Jerusalem the people who had been transported to Babylon were to be returning to Jerusalem.

The people had their faith even in Babylon. (Remember in the 1970s Boney M and “By the rivers of Babylon” from Psalm 137 ?). Isaiah shares God’s vision for the restoration of the community, in which the Temple would be a symbolic focal point for their faith.

Similarly Christians still have our faith even although we are unable to use the church buildings, symbolic focal points for our faith. And what is our vision ?

Central to their vision was that the temple would be a house of prayer for all peoples, and that God would gather the outcasts.

Have you had an eye test recently ? We speak about 20/20 vision. In the midst of all the changes and uncertainties of this year 2020 have we got 20/20 vision of God's plan ? May the central points of Isaiah help us to have a spiritual vision check ...

1. Contact !

When folk speak of the church or the Christian faith what springs to mind?

Suppose a car won't start. We say that it is dead. It is just a useless collection of bits and pieces because some fault prevents contact with the source of power. But when the fault is sorted, contact is restored with the source of power and it springs into life.

At the heart of the Christian faith is contact with God to Whom we can come in prayer and joy (v 7)

That is not because Christians are bigheaded, but because God is bighearted! We are so valuable to a holy God that in Jesus He opted into the world to deal with what has blown our contact with Him, and invite us back into a living relationship with Him.

Is contact with God central of our personal 2020 vision ? Of course there are other aspects we can find in the church, hopefully e.g. a warmth of encouraging caring fellowship. But they are secondary to and motivated by a real relationship with God to Whom we can pray.

What a comfort to be able to bring everything to God in prayer !

What about pausing to thank God for prayer...

2. Challenge

But while it is personal it is not private ... and while it is a comfort to belong to God as part of His people , there is a challenge to His team! It is not a case of escapism into a cosy bubble, for God's invitation extends to the scattered and the outcasts (v8)

Do we know any who have mistaken perceptions, e.g.

“I'm not the religious type”

“The church is not for the like of me”

“I'm too messed up for God to accept me” or recently

“I'm struggling to understand God and the coronavirus”

Re “I'm not the religious type”

Everyone has a world view which is accepted by faith and on which they base their identity and meaning in life.

Re “The church is not for the like of me”

Jesus welcomed all kinds of folk -

Zacchaeus, a traitor lining his pockets as a tax-collector

Nicodemus, an intellectual, afraid to be seen with Jesus

Thomas, the one full of questions

Re “I'm too messed up for God to accept me”

As none of us is perfect, it is only by the amazing grace of God offered to any of us that we have this relationship with God!

Re “I'm struggling to understand God and the coronavirus”

There is a very helpful wee book by John Lennox, available from 10ofThose “Where is God in a Coronavirus World?”

The challenge to Christians is to share this offer with others ! Young folk are searching for identity and for a hope and a cause to which they can commit their energies. Thinking of young folk in our community are we able to echo Psalm 78 ?

We ... will tell to the coming generation

the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,
and the wonders which he has wrought....

He commanded our fathers

to teach to their children;

that the next generation might know them,

the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God”

*What about pausing to think of anyone we know who might have any of the mistaken perceptions and so feel outcast
and then how we might help them or any young person.....*

3. Cosmic

The vision is of a “house of prayer for all nations” (v7)

Covid-19 has reminded us forcibly that we live in a global village. While we have a particular belonging to our local congregation, we are also part of God’s global team !

The God with Whom we have contact in prayer is the Creator, Whose laws of science and nature made the universe. The Christian faith had a major influence in the development of our local culture, but is not just a feature of our culture. The Christian message of a cosmic God is global truth. It is important that in this “post truth era” global truth is affirmed in the public arena and reflected in our concern and prayers for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the “Lord’s Prayer” we say “Our Father Who art in heaven ...” This is not just a postal address, but a reminder of

- i. the greatness of the cosmic God to Whom we can come as children to a caring father, and
- ii. that when we - with others throughout the world - say “Father” we are reminded of our brothers and sisters, an estimated 245 million of whom are being persecuted for putting their head above the parapet as Christian believers.

What about pausing to remind ourselves of this every time we say the Lord’s Prayer

As we, like the folk in the lectionary passage for today, look forward to the restoration of access to the buildings which are the symbolic focus of our faith, may we be a people focussing on contact with our living God of the galaxies and the privileged responsibility of helping others to find their hope in the risen Jesus !

Prayers of Intercession.

Lord, hear us as we pray for our world ...

... for those leaders who are seeking justice and peace ;
... for Christian Aid, Tear Fund and Open Doors helping refugees ;
... for those who are persecuted for their faith. Being unable to meet together, and when we do forbidden to sing, may we realise in a small way the problems of our brothers and sisters who are not able to meet together in public, and when they do they cannot sing for fear of being overheard.
Lord help us to care

Lord, hear us as we pray for our country ...

... for those who are involved in caring for others in the NHS, social care, schools and the emergency services;
... for those whose treatment has been delayed due to Covid-19.
Lord help us to reflect the love of Jesus

Lord, hear us as we pray for our community ...

... for those whom we know who are weary with ongoing illness ;
... for those who are hurting, isolated, worried or struggling
Lord help us to be sensitive and supportive

Lord, hear us as we pray for the church ...

... for the kirk session that it may have wisdom to know when and how to open the church restoring worship and other activities ;
... for our minister that he may be refreshed by his break
... for the sharing of the love and hope of Jesus with young folk;
... that the people of our land in all its parts
 may hear clearly the good news of Jesus
 may see the life of the Holy Spirit in your people
 and so come to know the love of God the Father
Lord help us in our responsibility

Lord, hear us as we bring our personal prayers ...

... for and for
and for and that I may have 20/20 spiritual vision.

*“Be Thou our vision, O Lord of our hearts
Naught be all else to us, save that Thou art”*

In the name of Jesus

Who when He on earth taught those who loved Him to pray ..

OUR Father, which art in heaven,

Hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:

For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,

For ever.

Amen.

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