

Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 8th September 2019

10.30am Morning Worship led by Doreen Hunt

6.00pm Evening Worship at Town Close
led by Christine Campy

A Gathering Prayer from the Roots Resources

Lord, you have called us your children; never have we been your slaves. So, we gather in the liberty imparted by your love, the love that sets us free.

As we have received this love, help us to share it freely, inside and outside these walls.

Father, we come before you as your family in this place.

We think of our wider family in the Christian Church, people the world over whom we could call 'brother' or 'sister' if we met them. Yet all people are your children.

Help us to remember that those with different lifestyles, outlooks and ideas are also part of our family, the human family, and therefore worthy of our notice – because they are worthy of yours.

Amen

Lectionary Readings:

Deuteronomy 30 v15-20 The Offer of Life or Death

Psalms 1 Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked

Philemon 1-21 Thanksgiving & Prayer/Paul's Plea for Onesimus

Luke 14 v25-33 The Cost of Being a Disciple

One Of The Family

This week our focus is on our response to slavery & knowing when to be an advocate. We need to look out for ways to connect faith with everyday life.

Paul sends Onesimus, a runaway slave, back to his former master with an appeal that he is forgiven, freed, and welcomed into the family as a 'beloved brother'.

This week's reading from Deuteronomy is taken from the closing section, just as Moses is about to die and Joshua is to be appointed as his successor. As the Israelites are about to enter the Promised Land after 40 years in the wilderness, Moses makes his final statement on the Law. He makes it clear that in offering the Israelites the Law of God, he has simply set out a choice: between life and death, prosperity and adversity. It is a stark warning: turn to other gods and the 'land of milk and honey' will turn into a land of death and dust. At the heart of life, Moses suggests, is covenant – the relationship that God has made with his people. It is not a burden but a blessing, one that can be traced back to the deepest family connections of God's people – to the Fathers of the Israelites themselves: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Throughout the Christian era, Paul's brief letter to Philemon – just 25 verses – has influenced Christian ideas about slavery. In order to appreciate its significance, it is worth reminding ourselves that Paul wrote in a context where slavery was permitted and commonplace. Paul's achievement in Philemon is to find a creative solution to a problematic situation. Onesimus – about whom Paul writes – is a slave who has run away from Philemon, a leader of a church in the town of

Colossae. Whatever the reason Onesimus ran away (some have claimed it was because he stole from Philemon), Paul's solution is a startling one. He invites Philemon to treat Onesimus as 'no longer a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother'. The twist is that the letter is to be delivered by the hand of Onesimus himself. Given that a runaway slave's life was forfeit, Onesimus risked death by returning to his former master. To modern eyes, Paul's solution might seem both risky and foolish as well as being insufficiently condemnatory of slavery. We might want Paul simply to tell Philemon that slavery is wrong, to forgive his slave and set him free. But Paul adopts a contextual response. He could have compelled Philemon, but he doesn't. He focuses on the priority of love and how Christ is known in relationship. He wants Philemon to recognise Onesimus as family. Paul is risking himself for justice and reconciliation, ideas at the heart of the gospel. Paul writes to a friend, Philemon and he says, "I always thank my God, as I remember you in my prayers" (1 v4). Paul gave thanks to God and he also prayed for his friend. Do you ever think about why we pray? I learned recently about an experiment which shows why it is important to pray. Patients in a hospital being treated for heart problems were divided into two groups. One group of patients was prayed for and the other group was not. The patients did not know about this experiment and neither did the doctors who took care of them. After the experiment was over, everyone was amazed to find that those patients who were prayed for, got well faster and had fewer things go wrong than the patients who did not receive prayers. One doctor, who saw the remarkable results, now devotes his life to telling others about the power of prayer to heal people. This lesson reminds us to pray for each other, just as Paul prayed for his friend. Pray often for yourself, your family, friends, and even people you don't know and "thank God always."

There is something shocking in Jesus' words about discipleship in the passage from Luke's Gospel. He says that unless a follower hates mother and father, spouse and children, they cannot be a true disciple.

Discipleship requires that a follower takes up the cross and then follows Jesus to the place of crucifixion. These words would have been even more shocking to Jesus' first audience than they are to us. If we are inclined to place family on a high footing, in first-century Jewish contexts they would have been central to a whole way of life. To suggest that following the way of God might lead to a criminal's death might be heard as the words of a fanatic. Jesus' shock tactics seek to re-centre community around God rather than the family networks of obligation that were standard in his world. God's love is the foundation of family, even more so than our blood relations; it may be costly to give ourselves completely to God, but it will place family in its proper perspective.

Each reading brings out different nuances in our understandings of community, family and relationship. Moses reminds the people that he is about to leave, and that the basis of true family is God's covenant. St Paul brings out the implications of this covenantal love in the context of actual human lives, those of Onesimus and Philemon. All of this is centred around the sacrificial love described by Jesus. Such love – which is God's love – is the basis of true family.

A Sending Out Prayer:

In an unjust world, be just.

Speak for those who have no voice.

Act for those whose chains hold them back.

Consider strangers your siblings, and free them as God has freed you.

Amen.