

Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 11th October 2020

9.00am & 10.30am Communion Services



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

Lord God, faithful and loving, we do not always feel like rejoicing. Even as we gather to worship you, our minds are sometimes distracted and elsewhere, weighed down by the burdens of our lives. Help us, in this moment, to find it within our hearts to REJOICE in your constancy and loving care for us. People of God, let us rejoice. Lord God, we never know what the future holds or where life will take us next. We never know what is just around the corner and what the outcomes of things will be. But we know that whatever follows on from this moment, you are here with us, by our side, above and beneath us, entwining your life with ours, surpassing all human understanding. In this moment, bless us and awaken us to your abiding presence.

Amen.

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 25 v1-9 (p708) Praise to the Lord

Psalm 23 (p555) The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.

Philippians 4 v1-9 (p1180) Exhortations

Matthew 22 v1-14 (p990) The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

Peace of Mind

This week our focus is on how the Philippians were prepared for life without Paul.

As Paul signs off his letter, he urges the community to support two women named as co-workers, and to be always rejoicing, praying, pursuing whatever is honourable, pure and praiseworthy, and – he says – the peace of God will be with them.

In the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 25 v1-9 we are given a remarkable vision. God will bring together a new community in celebration of the overthrow of those who previously held the reins of power.

The prophet draws a distinction between those who gave refuge to the poor and needy, and those who were ruthless. For the former (the poor and needy included) there will be an opportunity to embrace a new life, portrayed as a great banquet. Grief will be a thing of the past: God will wipe away every tear.

There is an interesting contrast between the ruthless aliens, and other outsiders – from ‘all people’ and ‘all nations’ – who are welcome at the feast.

Now to Philippians 4 v1-9. Paul prepares to sign off his letter. Writing from prison, we are not sure where Paul is or his exact circumstances (in Caesarea in the late AD 50s or Rome in the early 60s), but it is possible that he knew that the Philippians would not see or hear from him again.

Two women – Euodia and Syntyche (pronounced Sun-tu-ké) – are named as co-workers. We know nothing about these two women other than that an issue had arisen between them. However, it is an indication that, despite the best efforts of the Church to marginalise the contribution of women for many centuries, women were active in the ministry of the Early Church. We also know nothing about the issue. But we can see how Paul urges Syzygus – the word or name translated as ‘loyal companion’ – to help them sort out the problem. Perhaps he is making a pun, urging his friend to live up to her name!

The verses that follow suggest a way of being and behaving designed to minimise such quarrels. In a sense, they are a spiritual exercise, designed to focus the mind in ways that drive out bad thoughts and create positive feelings towards others. Don’t stoke up your anxiety; pray about things instead. Let your mind think about good, beautiful, honourable things. God’s peace will then come to you, to guard your hearts and minds in Christ. Note that ‘heart’ in the ancient world was the centre of the will (the stomach was the centre of the emotions), so the peace of God is not there to make you feel better but to help you do the right things.

This week, in the passage from Matthew’s Gospel, the setting shifts from a vineyard to a wedding banquet given by a king for his son. Again, two groups of slaves are sent, this time to call the invited guests. Their responses range from casual indifference and mundane excuses to cold-blooded violence. Such ill treatment of his representatives brings out the worst in the king, who responds in kind; then he sends other slaves out into the streets with an indiscriminate invitation. Those who eventually celebrate the son’s wedding turn out to be, not surprisingly, a mixed bunch. But there is no room for those who closed their hearts and minds to

the original invitation, or for the guest who hadn’t bothered to dress for the occasion.

This parable has the same message as that of last week. Israel’s leaders run the risk of excluding themselves from God’s reign if they continue to close their hearts and minds to God’s persistent call. Though Matthew once again adapts Jesus’ story into an allegory of the worst of Israel’s responses to God, it would be unwise to look for one-to-one correspondences for all its features. We may see Israel’s prophets in the king’s slaves, but the vengeful king is hardly an image of the God who is with us as the Father of Jesus (see Matthew 1 v23). The ruler’s rage is more likely to reflect the storyteller’s rhetorical style. Jesus often uses exaggeration to press his point home. Perhaps this is the only way of penetrating hearts and minds that are so impervious to the call of God.

The links between the readings

Each reading offers signs of a more harmonious and peaceful way of life. It is a great banquet beyond grief and death (Isaiah), like being invited to a wedding feast (Matthew) and centred on the peace of God (Philippians). But take care not to get too carried away – it still includes the possibility of God’s wrath (Isaiah), sorting out communal disputes (Philippians) and the possibility of being thrown out if you don’t wear the right clothes (Matthew)!

A Sending Out Prayer

We go our separate ways, Lord – perhaps with smiles or frowns; with our hopes and with fears; with answers but also questions; maybe crying and with heavy hearts; or with anxieties, or relief. We go our separate ways, Lord, but we never go alone. With thankful hearts, we share the journey of life with each other and with you. Be with us as we go.

Amen.