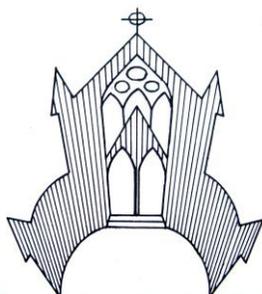


Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 14th November 2021



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

God of the country lanes, speeding motorways and city streets,
of twisting paths, straight streets and hidden alleyways,
of the small gate and narrow path, we ask for provision for our journey, & to
see you walking beside us, protecting us, encouraging us, loving us.
Surrounded by memories, near and far, we come before you, O Lord, our
God.

In the middle of turmoil, you offer us peace.

In the middle of conflict, you offer us resolution.

We come before you now to worship & we know that our future is in your
hands & that your promises are true.

Amen

Lectionary Readings:

Daniel 12 v1-3 (p898) The End Times

Psalms 16 (p549) Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge.

Hebrews 10 v11-14, (15-18), 19-25 (p1208) Christ's Sacrifice Once for
All/A Call to Persevere

Mark 13 v1-8 (p1019) Signs of the End of the Age

Hidden Promise

This week our focus explores finding a path through difficult times.

In response to a disciple's admiration of the Temple, Jesus predicts its
complete destruction. He warns his followers against the attractions of
leaders who make empty promises. Rather than be overwhelmed by what
must take place, we're told not to be alarmed – just as joy comes following
the pain of childbirth, these earthly pains hold the promise of God's kingdom
to come.

Sometimes it's hard to find a path through troubling times, and we often
flounder in the face of real difficulty. It can be helpful to be reminded that
what we are going through almost certainly has been experienced before,
and there is much wisdom from those who have gone before us that can
sustain us until the light appears once more.

The Book of Daniel was the last book in the Old Testament to be written
(around 180 BC), during a period of severe tribulation – probably when the
Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes, desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem and
provoked the Maccabean revolt. However, the events it describes are set
much earlier, during the time of the Babylonian exile (sixth century BC). And
these were certainly difficult times.

Daniel was written to encourage Jewish people to be loyal to God in the most
testing of circumstances. It is the only apocalyptic book in the Hebrew
Scriptures. The word 'apocalypse' comes from the Greek and means
'revelation'. In chapters seven to 12, Daniel has a series of visions in which he
sees what God is about to do. Promises that might otherwise have been
hidden are revealed, culminating in the declaration – in chapter 12 – that the
archangel Michael, 'the great prince', will come to protect the people of God.
The promise is that people will be delivered; verse two has the only clear

expression of a belief in resurrection to be found in the Old Testament. Even in the most extreme and difficult of times there is hope.

Psalm 16 is from the Davidic collection & is a Psalm of confidence, although it is not clear in the original Hebrew if it is confidence in the middle of a crisis, or as a result of deliverance from a crisis. The psalm is called a 'miktam' (epigram - a short poem, especially a satirical one, with a witty or ingenious ending). The word's meaning is obscure but may be related to 'inscription' or 'engraving', which in turn might suggest that it was written after the writer had come through a crisis. Whatever the technical interpretation, the faith-inspiring power of the psalm is clear. Here is assured confidence in the Lord who provides the means of sustenance and celebration, who gives wise counsel and life-giving instruction and gladness and security. And through all this, a path of life emerges.

All four of this week's readings offer hope in God in challenging and distressing times. The psalmist rejoices in the 'path of life' that the Lord reveals, and the writer to the Hebrews, here in Hebrews 10, speaks of a 'new and living way' (v20) through which forgiveness and hope are found. And that way is the self-offering of Jesus that inaugurated the new covenant, promised by the prophets and sealed by his blood. This is the way that brings assurance (v22) and enables those who follow it to 'hold unswervingly to the hope we profess' (v23). The people are then exhorted to meet together, to encourage each other and 'to spur one another on towards love and good deeds' (v24). Such is the pathway of discipleship.

Mark 12 v38-44 is a shocking passage. Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple would have been deeply disturbing to those who heard his words, given the enormous significance of the building. For the Jewish people it was synonymous with their identity, and it served as a powerful sign of God's presence among them. For many, the destruction of the Temple would have felt like the end of the world. It is worth noting that it was important to Jesus too. He had been dedicated to the Lord there as a baby. He valued it as a place of learning, a place of prayer for all people and a place where people could express their devotion (see last week's Gospel reading). So, Jesus would have had no pleasure in predicting the Temple's demise.

According to Mark, Jesus has a private conversation with Peter, James, John and Andrew. The tone is one of caution ('Watch out', v5) and reassurance ('do not be alarmed', v7). There will be traumatic times, but these are the

beginning of the birth pangs of the age and kingdom to come. We do well to take note of the context and way in which Mark presents Jesus talking with his closest friends about the most testing of times.

A Christian army medic who had served in both Iraq and Afghanistan volunteered to serve on the Covid-19 ward in his local hospital. He found it as challenging a place to be as any of the field hospitals he had served in. His daily prayer was that he would be able to be a bearer of the light of Christ in the middle of trauma. Today's readings, together with Remembrance Sunday stories, offer plenty of scope for reflection on being, and encouraging one another to be, bearers of hope in difficult circumstances, thereby helping others to find pathways through dark times.

I wonder if you find the 'birth pangs' metaphor used by Jesus helpful. Of course, if we have not been through the process and experience of childbirth ourselves, our perspective might be different to those who have. But hopefully we can all understand that the metaphor is one that, for most people, speaks of hope in places of pain.

Recent times have been difficult and painful in all sorts of ways for most of us. Indeed, we would probably be here a long time if we tried to list all the different forms of pain and grief that people have experienced over the past year or two. Are we able to find glimmers of hope in those experiences of pain and grief? Are we able to see new things, new possibilities, new pathways in life, emerging in or through them? Admittedly, that can be a very hard thing to do, to achieve – especially if we are facing difficult events for the first time, or they are truly life shattering. But it is God's promise that we will.

Sending Out Prayer:

Lord God, source of all love,
from whom every soul has come,
and to whom every soul will return,
help us to hold close the stories of those
who have gone before us,
and to take comfort from their wisdom.
Let their stories tint our daily life with colour,
and give us hope and light to our path.

Amen