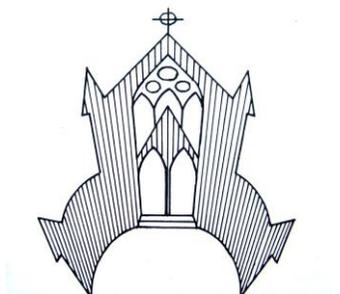


Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 28th November 2021



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

As we light our first Advent candle, may its flame be for us a sign of hope; may its warmth be a symbol of God's love for us & may it inspire us to be hope bearers – people of compassion and integrity, as we gather in the name of Jesus who is the light of the world.

God of mystery, we have stepped into Advent & await your revelations. We have stepped into Advent, hoping that we & others will see & feel & know your message. You are a patient, persevering God, who offers your all for us; you offer to us the depth of your being, the essence of life, the gift of love beyond compare.

And we wait to celebrate again the gift of Jesus born for us, given for us. We look to you, for you will show us true life bursting forth. **Amen**

Lectionary Readings:

Jeremiah 33 v14-16 (p796) Promise of Restoration

Psalms 25 v1-10 (p556) To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul ...

1 Thessalonians 3 v9-13 (p1187) Timothy's Encouraging Report

Luke 21 v25-36 (p1057) Signs of the End of the Age

Heads Up

This week our focus explores looking for small signs of hope. The Gospel reading is set in Holy Week, a day or two before the arrest of Jesus. He had caused uproar in the Temple and spoken to the crowds. Both sets of religious leaders, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, tried to trap Jesus in arguments. At first glance this passage can seem full of big, threatening images. Yet, if we keep reading, we see the signs of hope: the buds on the tree heralding summer; the signs of God's kingdom; and the encouragement to 'raise your heads' (v28). Sometimes it can be hard to see the joy that awaits, that will come...in time. But even in the most hostile of environments, there are signs of life. Indeed, life often needs a tough start in order to grow – eg a hard winter or a forest fire. Perhaps it's the same for us, too. In tough times, we need to look for those little signs of hope.

Jeremiah 33 is the last chapter of the so-called Book of Consolation (chapters 30-33). They are hopeful chapters that promise redemption and restoration to Israel and Judah. They are set in a challenging if not terrifying context – the Babylonians are besieging Jerusalem – but their message is overtly reassuring and hopeful.

The basis for this reassurance and hope is the faithfulness of God enshrined in promises that the Lord has made in the past and future, focused in the promise of a 'righteous Branch' that will spring up for David – an apparently small sign that, from the Christian tradition, we understand to have been realised in a tiny infant born in a little town called Bethlehem. While giving thanks for this, there is an 'end of the world' tension here. The text can remind us that there is still a need for

the promises it contains to be fully realised – so that all the people of Jerusalem, Israel and Palestine (and the whole world) can live in safety. Psalm 25, attributed to David, is earnest, self-aware and deeply confident in, and dependent upon, the goodness, love and faithfulness of God. The psalmist is aware of his ongoing need for guidance and forgiveness, and deeply conscious of his dependence upon the Lord for both. Verse 10 ('All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant.') reminds us that, however exalted or humble we are, there is an ongoing need within people – even those of deep faith – for signs and assurances of hope and forgiveness.

It is a characteristic feature of Paul's letters that he takes time to offer thanks to those he is writing to, along with prayers and blessings for them. This thankful and prayerful piece in 1 Thessalonians 3 comes at a point in the letter when Paul has just received an encouraging report from Timothy about the Thessalonian Christians. Their faithfulness and love have been a great sign and source of hope and encouragement to Paul and his companions through times of distress and persecution. Here is a reminder that even the most hopeful and encouraging of people (and Paul could be both of these at times) need encouragement themselves. No wonder Paul exhorts his readers to encourage one another a little later in the letter (1 Thessalonians 5 v11).

In response to the encouragement he has received, Paul prays that they may be able to see each other face to face again. How many prayers like that were prayed during the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic? And Paul concludes this part of the letter with the heads-up Advent-like call to be ready for the coming of the Lord Jesus – a theme he will go on to explore more thoroughly in chapters 4 and 5.

Luke's so-called 'little apocalypse' in chapter 21 is a startling passage. There are sobering warnings of distressing times to come. Recently, there has been a real sense that the powers of the earth, if not the heavens, have been shaken. It is possible to be overwhelmed by the text and recent world events but, in the light of both, Jesus in his

speaking and Luke in his editing offer signs of hope to look for, and ways of alert, hopeful living to be strong in.

In verse 28, there is the call to 'stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is near'. These are confident, hopeful actions. In verse 31, there is the hopeful assurance that 'the kingdom of God is near'.

And in verse 33, we have the confidence-giving statement that Jesus' 'words will not pass away'. Throughout the passage there is an undergirding sense of the faithfulness of God fulfilling God's purposes and not being thrown off course by tumultuous events. Alongside this is an associated call to faithfulness on the part of God's people.

In verse 27, we have the most exalted image of Jesus in Luke's Gospel: the picture of 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory'. It is interesting that the church's liturgical year ends with a celebration of Christ the King and the next year begins with this portrayal of Jesus. Maybe we too can lose sight of or appreciation of the glory of Jesus – something that Advent gives us the opportunity to rediscover, in both the wonder of the glorious one who is to come and the sign of the vulnerable baby of Bethlehem.

Sending Out Prayer:

Eternal God, hope of the world, we cannot grasp the immensity of your being, and yet all around us we catch glimpses of your power. You speak to us in nature's blessings. You speak to us through science and creativity. You reveal yourself in the love and the care and the support of those around us. You show yourself when we most need to see you. When we least expect it, we see your hand at work. We read your Word, time and time again, and suddenly, we are amazed by seeing something new. Eternal God, we adore you.

Loving God,
let us go in hope, live by hope,
and be signs of hope for all to see.
In Jesus' name.

Amen