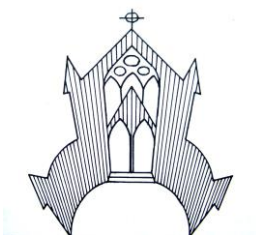


Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 10th March 2024



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

God gives us light. And yet often we stick to darkness.

It takes courage to go into the light, a willingness to start again, to keep trusting – trusting that one day, we will see, and finally find peace.

Wonderful God, in the very beginning, the first thing you gave us was your light, your heavenly light, even before you made the sun.

In your light we flourish.

And we call your Son, Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

He reaches into our darkness,
and heals us, and makes us whole.

Today, help us to learn how
to be children of your light.

Amen

Lectionary Readings:

Numbers 21 v4-9 (p158) The Bronze Snake

Psalms 103 v(1-7),8-13 (p605) For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love ...

Ephesians 2 v1-10 (p1174) Made Alive in Christ

John 3 v14-21 (p1066) Jesus Teaches Nicodemus

How We Stay in the Light

Jesus speaks to Nicodemus, a Jewish Leader and a Pharisee, of his being sent because of God's love to offer eternal life to the world. He uses the image of light and darkness to explain the concept of judgement. Those who do wrong things avoid the light, because it reveals what they are doing; but those who do what is good and true are attracted to the light.

This week we explore the sense of darkness we can feel when life is tough. God empowers us to turn to face our fears, to allow what is hidden and eating away inside us to come into the light and be healed. And as we turn towards Christ – the light of the world – he shows us the way.

The people of God, set free from slavery in Egypt (see Exodus 14), spend 40 years (or a significant period of time) living and travelling in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses.

This is the time of their formation, a time when they can learn how to live as free people rather than slaves, a time when they can learn how to live as God's people. When they forget to trust God – complaining about their living conditions or being afraid of the inhabitants of the land they are about to travel through – there are consequences. When they trust God, there are also consequences – but good ones. Bit by bit they become better at following God, trusting God, relying on God, living by the framework they have been given that structures each element of life, from their dealings with God to their dealings with each other.

The people of God are not perfect, but they are learning. Although in today's Old Testament reading from Numbers 21, they complain

against God as they have done before, they quickly realise their error. Sin, being out of step with God, is serious; its consequences are far reaching, and so it needs to be addressed. The poisonous snakes cause the people to pause and reflect. The bronze serpent gives people a physical way to repent and seek healing, a tangible way of putting things right. It has no power of its own, although it is kept as a relic and a future generation worships it as if it is a god, and so it has to be destroyed (2 Kings 18). It is simply a focal point for the people to choose to look at it and live; a means of grace, a prompt to turn away from a previous poor choice and live God's way once again.

Psalms 107 is a psalm of thanksgiving which reflects on God's loving response to prayer. It sets out a number of scenarios in which people are in difficulty – wandering in the desert, in prison, sick, on ships in storms – and, on crying out to God, are rescued. Today's verses could easily have been sung, rejoicing, by those in today's Old Testament reading who witnessed others or experienced themselves being bitten by the poisonous snakes, looking up at the bronze serpent and finding life.

In this circular pastoral letter to several churches in Asia, Paul writes in Ephesians 2 of his desires for the young churches: that they will flourish in their faith, that they will live in unity, that they will be focused on their new life in Christ and not be drawn back into their old life. In these verses, he sets out the contrast between their 'old' and 'new' lives: they were dead, and now they are alive. It is not possible to make a more stark contrast, and the message is clear: they can't live both an old life and a new one; they can't live in both darkness and light, in both death and life. There is a sense of abundance here: this new life comes from God's rich mercy, God's great love, God's immeasurable grace. It is a gift. While the world is often dark, we have an alternative, a choice to live in the light, to be grateful, to allow ourselves to flourish in what God has given to us.

The perspective of the world portrayed in John's Gospel is one of contrasts: life and death, light and darkness. There is no 'in between',

no shadows, no half-light. People choose life or death, light or darkness. In John 3, John picks up the imagery of the bronze serpent in this week's Old Testament reading. Just as anyone who chose to look up at the bronze serpent would live, so anyone who believes in Jesus will live. The act of looking at the serpent was an act of faith, of looking for healing; so too looking to Jesus for healing brings life. John's explanation of this is God's unconditional love. The newly-formed people of God in the Old Testament reading needed tangible ways to understand God and to express themselves to God. So, they were given ways of doing this – the sacrificial system, offerings, the bronze serpent. The need persists; but now, says John, God loves the world so much that God comes to the world in person – a truly tangible way of demonstrating how to live in the light.

A famous prayer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's begins: 'In me there is darkness, but with you there is light...' Bonhoeffer was a German Pastor and theologian prior to, and during, World War 2. He publicly spoke out against the Nazi regime and his involvement in a conspiracy to overthrow it led, eventually, to his imprisonment and death. Like the Israelites choosing to look at the bronze serpent, he repeatedly chose to focus on God, not his fear.

The invitation is not to turn in on ourselves when life is tough, turn into our personal darkness, but to turn towards Christ, trusting in his light, trusting in God's grace, beyond our own resources. As we look and trust we find ourselves healed and forgiven. And that foretaste of the 'peace beyond understanding; (Phil 4:7) sets us free to be our part of God's light shining in our corner of the world.

Sending Out Prayer

Loving God, we humans are afraid of the darkness.

But, for you, darkness and light are alike, and no problem.

You can see in the dark, and we can put our hand in yours and trust you, knowing that the light will dawn again – in your time.

Amen.