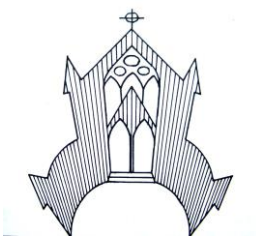


Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 17th March 2024



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

As we gather, make us mindful of the wonderful variety of people and experiences in our church community, in our local community, in our nation and in the wider world – so much more accessible to us now than it was 100 years ago. May we be truly thankful for all these riches. You, Lord God, are with us as we come to worship you. You have promised us so much and your call to us has brought us here. Accept our worship, our words and thoughts, our confessions and our promises; for you are ours and we are yours, this and every day.

Amen

Lectionary Readings:

Jeremiah 31 v31-34 (p793) 'The time is coming' declares the Lord ...

Psalms 51 v1-12 (p573) Create in me a pure heart, O God ...

Psalms 119 v9-16 (p617) How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word.

Hebrews 5 v5-10 (p1204) Jesus the Great High Priest

John 12 v20-33 (p1080) Jesus Predicts His Death

God's New Covenant

This week's passages introduce us to some big challenges. Can we grasp the idea that God's grace is offered, and God's promise made truly to all people? Do we see 'difference' as a good thing? How prone are we to 'othering' those we perceive as unlike us?

Following their time in the wilderness, the people of God settle into the 'promised land'. Their success at living as God's people is mixed, with periods of faithfulness to God and periods when they go astray.

Through the prophets God calls them to return to living their covenant relationship with God. Close to 500 years after being set free from slavery, the land splits into two kingdoms, a divided people. A couple of hundred years later, having persistently ignored the warnings to turn back to God, the northern kingdom is captured by Assyria, the ruling superpower of the time, and is no more. Little over 100 years on, the much smaller southern kingdom is also ignoring warnings to turn back to God from, among others, Jeremiah. Jeremiah pronounces God's judgement on the remaining people of God, which will lead to their capture and exile at the hands of Babylon, the current ruling superpower. However, Jeremiah's message is tinged with hope and promise. After the judgement and exile will come restoration. When God's people, in exile, turn back to God, God will make a new covenant with them. This covenant, described in today's reading, will be characterised by a close relationship with God. It will not rely on a knowledge of God mediated to the people by a few or passed on through the stories of God's past interactions with them. It will be a new covenant, a covenant for this people, the current and future

people of God. At its heart is the promise that 'I will be their God, and they shall be my people'.

Although it was written well before the time of Jeremiah, Psalm 51 gives a good illustration of the relationship between God and the people of God in the new covenant. Being the people of God entails turning away from sin, being made clean, restoration.

Psalm 119, on the other hand, is a lengthy reflection on the law – instruction, teaching, precepts – provided by God as a framework to enable God's people to live the covenant relationship. These verses emphasise the value of this framework in enabling human flourishing. Melchizedek was both king and high priest of Salem (probably an early Jerusalem) in the time of Abram. In Israelite culture he represented something unusual in holding both political (as king) and spiritual (as high priest) leadership. He is therefore used to symbolise the ideal leadership that brings together kingly rule and being a bridge between God and God's people to enable the covenant relationship to be maintained.

The reading from Hebrews 5 is part of a wider passage describing Jesus as the ideal high priest, able to relate both to humankind and to God, understanding our weaknesses, experienced in suffering, but also perfect and therefore totally reliable. Furthermore, Jesus holds this role because it has been given to him by God, not because of his genealogy or the tribe to which he belongs, both of which were determining factors in becoming either a king or a priest during Israelite history. This then supersedes all that has gone before and makes Jesus the key figure in the new covenant.

And so, to the Gospel reading. In a setting that is waiting for the new covenant described by Jeremiah to be fully realised, many are watching for a new leader from God – a Messiah – who will bring this about. John's Gospel is very open about the identity of Jesus as Messiah; This Messiah is characterised by absolute loyalty to God: Jesus' approach to his forthcoming death, and his petition and the voice from heaven in

response, highlight that this is what should be expected of the Messiah, with the glory going to God.

That the new covenant is different is picked up in the exchange involving the Greeks who wish to see Jesus. While the new covenant is open to all, Jesus is clear that they need to know what they are getting into: discipleship entails paradoxes, such as losing one's life in order to find life.

Does everyone have the chance to be their best selves in our church community? Some years ago, a couple, wife pregnant, joined a new church. They were asked if he fancied lay-preaching and if she'd like to join the creche rota. It was a tale of stereotyping that raises laughs now. But we limit and inhibit people in many ways – someone living in poverty who feels excluded because they can't put much in the collection; allowing someone's ethnicity or sexual orientation to affect what we feel able to ask or let them do; even practicalities, such as spaces inaccessible to those with mobility problems matter. Is it time to take a hard critical look at our ourselves?

When you buy a stick of rock at the seaside it's easily identifiable.

Running through it is the name of the place to which it belongs: 'Blackpool', 'Redcar', 'Brighton'. Wherever you break the rock, however much or little you eat, at every point it has its identifying feature. In the new covenant, God says that God's law will be within people, written on their hearts – running through us like the name in a stick of rock. What do people see in us that identifies us as who – and whose – we are?

Sending Out Prayer

Thank you, God, for each and every one of your amazing people, every one of them unique.

We go out joyful, knowing that your love is always there for us and reaches to every place and part of the whole world, and all the millions and billions of people, in every generation.

May that inspire and encourage us to be loving to all whom we meet in our day-to-day living. **Amen.**