

Call to Worship

“The Lord is great and is to be highly praised
in the city of our God, on his sacred hill.....
People of God, walk around Zion and count the towers;
take notice of the walls and examine the fortresses,
so that you may tell the next generation:
“This God is our God forever and ever;
He will lead us for all time to come” (Psalm 48 vv 1, 12-14 GNB)

Hymn 134

1. Christ, whose glory fills the skies Christ, the true, the only light Son of Righteousness, arise, triumph o'er the shades of night; Day-spring from on high, be near; Day-star in my heart appear.	2. Dark and cheerless is the morn unaccompanied by thee; joyless is the day's return, till thy mercy's beams I see, till they inward light impart, Glad my eyes, and warm my heart.
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3. Visit then this soul of mine;
pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
fill me, radiance divine;
scatter all my unbelief:
more and more thyself display
shining to the perfect day.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Prayer

O God our Father, grant that in these moments we may capture something of the wonder and glory of what you have done for us in the sending of your Son Jesus into our world and sharing our life'

Save us from complacency and refresh our souls with the power of your Spirit

Help us to rejoice in the light and throw off the cloak of darkness.

Forgive us our lack of faith and timidity to witness.

Fill our hearts with a zeal for righteousness and kindle within us a warm desire to continue our pilgrim way with courage and hope,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Lessons: Mark 6. 1-6 (GNB)

Jesus left that place and went back to his own home town, followed by his disciples. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue. Many people were there, and when they heard him, they were all amazed. “Where did he get all this?” they asked. “What wisdom is this that has been given him? How does he perform miracles? Isn't he the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters living here?”. And so they rejected him.

Jesus said to them, “A prophet is respected everywhere except in his own home town and by his relatives and family”. He was not able to perform any miracles there except that he placed his hands on a few sick people and healed them. He was greatly surprised because the people did not have faith.

(There have been people in Corinth criticising Paul and questioning his authority. He defends himself strongly. In the previous chapter he asserts that if people say he is a boasting fool, he will boast of what he has endured – floggings, shipwrecks, imprisonments and the like, but then he turns the argument around (11.30) “If I must boast I will boast about things that show how weak I am”)

2 Cor 12 vv 7 – 10 (GNB) But to keep me from being puffed up with pride, because of the many wonderful things I saw, I was given a painful physical ailment, which acts as Satan’s messenger to beat me and keep me from being proud. Three times I prayed to the Lord about this and asked him to take it away, But his answer was “My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak”. I am most happy, then, to be proud of my weaknesses, in order to feel the protection of Christ’s power over me. I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak then I am strong.

Sermon:

We live in the so-called post-Christian age. There is widespread criticism of religion and much of it, we can admit, is robust and difficult to counter. but try we must. As Peter puts it “*Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you, but do it with gentleness and respect*” (1 Peter 3.15) However some opposition is subtle and nuanced. For my last birthday one of my sons gave me a totally unexpected but very acceptable present of a gift subscription to “*History Today*”. It’s a monthly magazine over 100 pages long and is exactly what it says on the tin. It is full of articles from different areas of history with many of them bearing on today’s problems – the pandemic, global warming, conservation, international trouble-spots and the like.

A current series also gives leading academics the chance to reply to a fixed questionnaire. In a recent issue I was intrigued to see the answer ‘Paul of Tarsus’ to the question “Which person in history would you most like to have met?” and I was even more intrigued by the rest of the answer given by a female professor: “so I could steer him off the road to Damascus”. I wonder what she meant by that. Would she have preferred him to remain zealously staunch to his Judaism? Is she a member of one of the other world faiths and resents that Christianity is a rival in that market place? Or is she even a Christian of the kind you sometimes come across who believe that Jesus proclaimed the simple Gospel and Paul unnecessarily complicated it with his protracted doctrines? Or is she following the secular approach to religion: “a plague on all your houses”. Who knows?

Certainly Paul in our readings for today is speaking of his response to the call of Jesus and of the many hardships and suffering he has endured for the sake of the Gospel. But he doesn’t really want to boast of these. There was also obviously some physical infirmity troubling him and which he felt was restricting his mission. He prayed three times that it might be removed. What was his ‘thorn in the flesh’? Several suggestions have been made by commentators even including headaches, epilepsy, eyesight problems and malaria. God’s answer to Paul’s prayer was “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness”. And Paul accepted that as seen in the reading above.

Today’s Gospel lesson from Mark shows that even in the early days of his ministry Jesus experiences some element of suffering, very minor compared to that which he would have to face later, but suffering nevertheless. He and the disciples had gone back to his home town Nazareth and Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, where there is a good congregation many of whom, we are told, were amazed. What wisdom! Where does he get it all from? And what about those miracles? Wasn’t he the local carpenter – Joseph and Mary’s son? And we know his brothers and sisters too!

Jesus ruefully comments *“A prophet is respected everywhere except in his own home town and by his relatives and family.”*

Two sentences in the story caught my eye: *“And so they rejected him”* and *“He was greatly surprised because they did not have faith”*. Misunderstanding and rejection can be painful. Life for all of us doesn't always flow freely. Many minor irritations can confront us and we have to learn how to cope. We sometimes use a religious phrase and speak about having our 'cross to bear'. I believe that as a good rule of thumb we should not over-emphasise this in describing our own situation or underestimate it when thinking of other people's troubles.

The Rev Timothy Keller, a Presbyterian minister in Manhattan and prolific author, is a fine advocate for the Christian faith. I found his book *“Making Sense of God”* (2016) very helpful and encouraging as an example of those with the special gift of being able to communicate the Gospel to today's sceptical world.. When I read his latest book I was sad to realise that this could well be his last as he has been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. It was to have been a book about Easter to follow another he had written on Christmas, but as he began working on it, the world was overtaken by the pandemic and he himself was having to come to terms with the shock of his terminal cancer. The title he gave this book *“Hope in Times of Fear”* can resonate with many who are suffering in so many ways. It is not a maudlin book – he mentions his own health troubles just two or three times, but he gives a strong over-view of Christian hope. It is still a book about Easter (the subtitle is *“The Resurrection and the Meaning of Easter”*) and to read it is to have an education in biblical theology. You may not always agree with every interpretation but the cumulative impact of his arguments is compelling.

We cannot understand the mystery and random nature of pain and suffering. If illness is the will of God Jesus would not have lifted his hand to heal anyone. It is surely right to pray and work for healing, health and wholeness but wrong deliberately to hanker after suffering. Timothy Keller expresses this thought in his own time of great testing: *“So Christians see hard things as indeed hard and not to be sought, but we have been armed with this great truth, namely that when received with faith in God, hard things lead to the best things”*

The death of Jesus is significant but Keller stresses throughout this book that it is Christ's death **and** resurrection which form the basis of our hope. *“Christianity is a faith based on belief in historical realities and truths, but it is also a spiritual union with Christ through the resurrection”*.

I remember Lord Soper once saying *“I do not say 'I am a Christian', I say 'I am trying to be a Christian'”*. Ours is a work in progress. Faith needs to be fed and watered and nurtured as we continue our pilgrim way. The Victorian hymn-writer John Ernest Bode wrote what can still make our meaningful prayer:

O Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end;
Lord be for ever near me,
my master and my friend'
I shall not fear the battle,
if you are by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
if you will be my guide.

Amen

Prayers for Others

Lord, keep us mindful of the needs of others and help us to match our prayers with our attitude and actions.

In the wider world we pray for the victims of violence and natural disasters, for the hungry and the homeless, and for the many agencies for good striving to bring hope to a broken world.

We pray for national and local leaders that they may be inspired by a desire selflessly to serve their communities.

Inspire us all with a vision to care for the planet and to work for reconciliation, justice and peace.

We pray for the Church world-wide, especially in those places where fellow Christians are suffering persecution for their faith.

We pray for those we know who are passing through a time of sadness and stress.

Bind us together, Lord. in ties of love and fellowship.

And all our prayers we bring in the precious Name of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn 67

1. This, this is the God we adore,
our faithful, unchangeable friend,
whose love is as great as his power,
and neither knows measure nor end.
2. 'Tis Jesus, the first and the last,
whose Spirit shall guide us safe home;
we'll praise him for all that is past,
and trust him for all that's to come.

Joseph Hart (1712-1767)

Blessing