

By Jennie McGinlay

Hymns from *Singing the Faith*

Call to worship (*from the Book of Common Prayer, based on Psalm 24*)

The earth is the Lord's, for he made it:
Come, let us adore him.
Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness:
The mercy of the Lord is everlasting:
Lord, open our lips.
And our mouths shall proclaim your praise.

Hymn 255

1. The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
for Jesus restores what sin would destroy.
God's power and glory in Jesus we know;
and here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

2. The kingdom of God is mercy and grace;
the captives are freed, the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened in place of despair.

3. The kingdom of God is challenge and choice:
believe the good news, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross:
our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.

4. God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal;
in Jesus begun, in heaven made whole.
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
and all things cry glory to God all in all.

Prayer of Approach (*from rootsontheweb.com*)

We come to worship as we are, known by God and called by name. We come with our doubts and our fears to a Lord who knows doubt and fear too. We come, weary and weighed down, to the Spirit who breathes new life into us.

Prayer of Confession (*from www.methodist.org.uk*)

God of immense love and mercy, forgive us when we try to avoid following you, forgive us when we ignore your calling in our lives, forgive us when our busyness drowns out your still small voice and we attempt to go our own way. Forgive us when our actions prevent others from responding to God's calling in their lives.

God's love for us is not dependent on what we do. God's love for us does not diminish when we lose focus and lose our way. We are assured of the Lord's forgiveness.

Amen

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your Kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and for ever. Amen

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

5 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who are

drunk get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Reading: Zephaniah 1:7,12-18

⁷ Be silent before the Lord GOD!
For the day of the LORD is at hand;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice,

¹² At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the people
who rest complacently on their dregs,
those who say in their hearts,
‘The Lord will not do good,
nor will he do harm.’
¹³ Their wealth shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.
Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them.

The Great Day of the Lord

¹⁴ The great day of the Lord is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter,
the warrior cries aloud there.

¹⁵ That day will be a day of wrath,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
¹⁶ a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

¹⁷ I will bring such distress upon people
that they shall walk like the blind;
because they have sinned against the Lord,
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.

¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold
will be able to save them
on the day of the Lord’s wrath;
in the fire of his passion
the whole earth shall be consumed;
for a full, a terrible end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Reflection

What an uncomfortable reading from Zephaniah we are faced with today! I think many Christians find that these portrayals of God as a violent avenger do not sit well with our belief in a God of mercy and love. We might be tempted to view Zephaniah’s words as typically brutal Old Testament language, later tempered by “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” However, if we believe that this is the Word of God, we need to take the bull by the horns and try to understand what the text is telling us.

Zephaniah was a prophet active from approximately 640 – 621 BC. The King of Judah at this time was Josiah, who was attempting to reverse the trends set by the two previous kings, Manasseh and Amon, both of whom, influenced by the surrounding nations, led the people of Judah in worship of multiple deities and idols. It is possible that Josiah’s reforms in Judah were prompted by Zephaniah’s warnings, which were an attempt to shake the people out of their complacency and return to worship of the one God.

The judgement as described in our reading is terrifying, but the prophet’s reasons for this are clear – the complacency of the people:

*“At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the people
who rest complacently on their dregs,
those who say in their hearts,
‘The Lord will not do good,
nor will he do harm.’”*

Their assumption that the Lord “*will do no harm*” was perhaps based on their history as a people – in the past, rescued from Egypt, fed and cared for in the desert and then led into the Promised Land. But this prophecy shows us that God is not like some kind of indulgent grandfather, overlooking serious disloyalty. God is not indifferent to sin.

Some scholars believe that this “day of judgement” prophecy found its fulfilment in the Babylonian invasion of 597BC, when the Jews were taken into captivity; some argue that it will also have a modern day fulfilment - what is often called the “end of days.” Dramatic and alien as this feels to us in our comfortable modern life (at least here in the

West), we cannot ignore the fact that this prophecy *does* warn about complacency and *does* clearly warn us that God is not tolerant of sin.

It feels like a relief to move now into the New Testament, filled, as it largely is, with words of love and forgiveness.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonian congregation around 51AD, to a young church, established for just two to three years, and yet to fully mature in faith. For example, it seems that they had an expectation that the “Second Coming” would occur imminently, in their lifetimes, so their faith was easily shaken by deaths within the community. However, Paul addressed this:

“For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”

And he goes on:

“When they say, ‘There is peace and security’, then sudden destruction will come upon them.”

These words, then, echo Zephaniah’s words about the complacency of the people of Judah. What both passages tell us is that God will intervene dramatically in our world, that it will be sudden and we cannot know when this judgement will be.

Zephaniah includes the terrifying warnings:

*“in the fire of his passion
the whole earth shall be consumed;
for a full, a terrible end”*

and that sinners’

*“blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.”*

This is beginning to sound like the plot of a bad apocalyptic movie – indeed, a number of dramatic films have been made about “the end of the world.” However, the Bible, in particular the Old Testament, frequently employs vivid, figurative language, and there is no reason to believe these words literally. Nevertheless, the Bible is clear that God’s judgement is real, whatever form it takes.

Zephaniah writes that God will

“...search Jerusalem with lamps,”

Let’s think of this image alongside Paul’s words characterising Christians:

“But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.”

Imagine a searchlight, scanning for those doing evil. Evildoers are hiding in the darkness, scuttling away from the light, while God’s children are already in the light and need have no fear of discovery. Indeed, the faithful welcome the light of God. We can all choose where we are in this scenario and God regards our moral choices with seriousness. If we think our choices don’t matter, we deny our importance to God. Like a parent, it pains Him to see any of His children choose to live an evil or meaningless life and to reject Him. As Paul writes,

“For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us”

As I write this, I realise that I seem to be characterising people as either good and pure (Christians) or as evil sinners in darkness (unbelievers). Of course the world is far from that simple. How does the Lord judge those of other faiths, who have never known Jesus? How does He judge atheists who sincerely try to live a good life? We cannot claim to know how God’s great and superior wisdom operates and it is not our place to comment on the goodness or otherwise of other people. Paul writes that we have obtained *“salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,”* and we know that there is no other way, but God is the judge and we can have absolute confidence in His righteous judgement of all.

We must remain vigilant, for believers can be tempted and led astray by the immoral attractions of the world. What we need is not a date to plan for, ready for last minute repentance. We need to be ready today, tomorrow, and every single day.

Paul uses military language to motivate us:

“...since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation.”

To what extent are faith and love our guiding principles in life? How much is our outlook on the future marked by hope?

One writer suggests that, from time to time, it is wise to do a personal audit of our lives, just as we might check that all our doors are locked at night, that our smoke alarms are functioning, that we carry our belongings securely when we go out and that we eat healthily. In the same way let's be vigilant in checking our spiritual health and security. We can be strengthened in our resolve by our brothers and sisters, as Paul advised the Thessalonians:

“Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

Let us then continue to “belong to the day” having no fear of the Lord's judgement and with utter confidence in our promised salvation.

Prayer of Intercession

Lord we approach you with all our fears and helplessness to pray for our suffering world.

We lift to You those parts of the world where war is in progress; we pray for all those who are caught up in the violence while desiring only peace.

We are mindful of the sick in these places, those desperately in need of medical treatment while bombs explode around them.

We pray for relief from poverty around the world and for courage and strength for aid workers.

We are mindful of those fleeing dangerous places and ask You to bless their attempts to find a safe and peaceful home.

Please comfort the sick and fearful in our own country too. Bless the life-saving work of our nurses, doctors and other medical staff. Strengthen them during their long days.

Bless and comfort those nearing the end of life on this earth.

We remember those suffering with mental illness and addiction; we ask for your blessing on the services that help them.

And we pray for ourselves, for our circuit, for our towns. We pray that the church will be strong, will attract new worshippers and grow.

Lord, may we leave all our cares and fears with you, offering this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour.
Amen

Hymn 405

Great is the darkness that covers the earth
Oppression, injustice and pain
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair
Though many have come in Your name
Watching while sanity dies
Touched by the madness and lies

Chorus

Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus
Pour out Your spirit we pray
Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus
Pour out Your spirit on us today

May now Your church rise with power and love

This glorious gospel proclaim
In every nation salvation will come
To those who believe in Your name
Help us bring light to this world
That we might speed Your return

Chorus

Great celebrations on that final day
When out of the heavens You come
Darkness will vanish all sorrow will end
And rulers will bow at Your throne
Our great commission complete
Then face to face we shall meet

Chorus

Blessing

As we take our worship, praise and prayer into our daily lives, may we be sustained through the love of our Heavenly Father. May we feel the presence of the Son walking beside us, and know the power of the Spirit in both our actions and our words.

Amen