

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July 2020

Christ will uphold you – Isaiah 41:1-10, Ephesians 1:15-22

Talk by Andrew Griffiths, Prayers by Betty Friend

Hi, my name is Andrew and thanks for downloading the talk for St John's church for Sunday 12 July.

I will be reading from Isaiah 41 and Ephesians 1, giving a short talk and then Sue will be reading prayers written by Betty, before we end.

**Isaiah 41:1-10**

'Be silent before me, you islands!

Let the nations renew their strength!

Let them come forward and speak;

let us meet together at the place of judgment.

<sup>2</sup>'Who has stirred up one from the east,  
calling him in righteousness to his service?<sup>[a]</sup>

He hands nations over to him

and subdues kings before him.

He turns them to dust with his sword,

to wind-blown chaff with his bow.

<sup>3</sup>He pursues them and moves on unscathed,  
by a path his feet have not travelled before.

<sup>4</sup>Who has done this and carried it through,  
calling forth the generations from the beginning?

I, the Lord – with the first of them

and with the last – I am he.'

<sup>5</sup>The islands have seen it and fear;  
the ends of the earth tremble.

They approach and come forward;

<sup>6</sup> they help each other  
and say to their companions, 'Be strong!'

<sup>7</sup>The metalworker encourages the goldsmith,  
and the one who smooths with the hammer  
spurs on the one who strikes the anvil.

One says of the welding, 'It is good.'

The other nails down the idol so that it will not topple.

<sup>8</sup>'But you, Israel, my servant,  
Jacob, whom I have chosen,  
you descendants of Abraham my friend,

<sup>9</sup> I took you from the ends of the earth,  
from its farthest corners I called you.  
I said, "You are my servant";  
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.  
<sup>10</sup> So do not fear, for I am with you;  
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you and help you;  
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

### **Ephesians 1:15-23**

<sup>15</sup> For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, <sup>16</sup> I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup> I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit<sup>[f]</sup> of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

<sup>18</sup> I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, <sup>19</sup> and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength <sup>20</sup> he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

<sup>22</sup> And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Lockdown is easing, pubs are opening and now you can go swimming again – or at least very soon.

Everything is going back to normal, or is it?

We still have to socially distance and you have to register your address and phone number when going to a restaurant for a meal.

So actually, things aren't quite normal.

And it's the same for the church – we may be legally able to hold services, but we can't sing, we can't share the peace by shaking hands and we can't celebrate communion – which is the ceremony instituted by Jesus to remind us of His sacrifice for us and our identity as His body, the church.

At St John's we also have the strange situation of being in interregnum – without a vicar.

But as we begin to emerge, we can look forward to a new beginning, one where our vision – to care, to involve and to build a home for everyone – continues to have huge relevance for the people in our community.

You may be wondering why our new sermon series is looking at Isaiah and Ephesians – have we simply plucked to books out of the bible or is there a rationale?

You'll be pleased to know that there is a rationale, and it is very much linked to what I have just been talking about.

Both of these books are about new beginnings

In Isaiah we have the new beginning brought through the promise of God's salvation – written to a people in exile, taken from their homes and struggling to understand what their new situation meant for their belief in God.

Into this context Isaiah shared the powerful message of a God who cares, who is in control, and has a plan.

Isaiah prophesied of the new beginning, and in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul explains about the realisation of this new beginning through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

We are looking at these two books because by doing so we can see what the new beginning brought by Christ Jesus is and what it means for us.

In this morning's passages we can see how the power of God is manifest in Christ for our sake, for His church.

Firstly, the power of God is fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ.

We see this power emphasised in Isaiah 41:1-7.

In verse 2-4 it says

He hands nations over to him  
and subdues kings before him.

He turns them to dust with his sword,  
to wind-blown chaff with his bow.

<sup>3</sup> He pursues them and moves on unscathed,  
by a path his feet have not travelled before.

<sup>4</sup> Who has done this and carried it through,  
calling forth the generations from the beginning?

I, the Lord – with the first of them  
and with the last – I am he.

Isaiah makes it clear that God has all the power, and importantly the nations can see this power and fear it.

This power is all consuming, it is from the beginning of the world to its end – from the first generation to the last.

We are to be left in no doubt that there are no limitations to God's power, and no limitations to His ability to use it.

And we see the same in Ephesians 1:19-21:

and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength <sup>20</sup> he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

Again, God has incomparable power, but the critical thing in Ephesians is how this is demonstrated.

In Isaiah we saw the power of God being described in abstract terms.

But in Ephesians we see that this power finds its fullest meaning, we see its true nature, in the power of the resurrection.

We see the defeated and killed Son of God, raised from death and now in a place of ultimate authority.

The abstract nature of the power shown in Isaiah is the power of Christ's resurrection, and his place of complete victory at God the Father's right hand.

Second, we see what this power means – what is it for?

We can understand that the power of God means a new beginning in Christ.

Because the power that is explained in Isaiah and demonstrated in Christ's resurrection, is used to care, support and uphold us, the church.

In Isaiah 48:9-10 we see this.

It says:

I took you from the ends of the earth,  
from its farthest corners I called you.  
I said, "You are my servant";  
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.  
<sup>10</sup> So do not fear, for I am with you;  
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you and help you;  
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand

And in Ephesians 1:17-18 we read that Paul's prayer is that the church in Ephesus will realise that Christ will uphold them.

It says:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit<sup>[f]</sup> of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. <sup>18</sup> I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.

And in verses 22 and 23, we read that:

And God placed all things under [Christ's] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

There is an intimate picture here of Christ being head over everything – given authority and praise and glory, *for* the church.

His power, his authority, is used to support and care for His people.

We are described as *his* body, we, the church, are the fullness of him who fills everything.

That power, that ultimate power, is invested in Christ to pour out his care and protection on his people, his body, the church.

What does this mean for a new beginning?

First, as we look to the future, to understanding our place in world.

As we look to what reopening after Covid means, there is a truth that has never changed but one that we should reaffirm.

Christ is the basis of all we do – he is the ‘head over everything for the church’, verse 22.

Just as Isaiah prophesied the new beginning, and Ephesians tells us that this new beginning has come in the person of Christ, as we look to begin a new season of being a church in changed circumstances, we need to look to Christ as our guide, our hope and our strength.

We need to trust in God that we have a mission in Penge to spread the good news of Christ.

It can be hard in times like this to hold onto that faith, but just as Paul was writing to a new church, struggling to understand the implications of the situation it found itself in, so we need to be reminded that in good times and bad times, in normal times and strange times, the truth of Christ's life, death, resurrection and eternal love are unchanged.

Let's hold onto that.

The second thing is that it is notable that in Ephesians Christ engages with us in the plural.

He calls us to be a community – the church – which is to be his body on earth.

We are not called to deal with new beginnings on our own.

Sometimes we overstate the individual to the detriment of the community.

But in both Isaiah and Ephesians, in the prophesy and realisation, Christ is upholding his people and his community together.

This is a promise for the church of Christ.

So, let us hold onto that, let us support and care for one another, knowing that when we do, we are demonstrating the same power that raised Christ from the dead.

When we build our mission as a church around caring for the weakest in society – through CAP, the food bank, Little Fish – we are demonstrating the power that can reduce kings and kingdoms to dust.

The awesome nature of God's power is expressed not through destruction, but through the ability to love and care for the weakest and most vulnerable, through fighting for the rights of people who are discriminated against – be that because they have a disability, because of their gender or because of the colour of their skin, as the Black Lives Matter movement continues to rightly challenge us all.

We are called to show God's radical power to shape and change society – a power that is far stronger than any army, government or human creation.

In our new beginning, let's remember that Christ will uphold us and through us he will change the world.

I will finish with some words from Isaiah 40:28-31

'Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.'

Amen

And now Sue will lead us in prayers written by Betty.

### **Prayers**

*Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name; you are mine.*

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father we come to you with thankful hearts that you are always with us, holding us in your arms. In these uncertain times when many are afraid, and there is much confusion, help us to know that you are walking beside us. Many are grieving for lost friends and relatives, wondering why you took them, but believers know that you have conquered death by your sacrifice on the cross. We know that the covid-19 virus is still active, and pray that people will take notice of the government's guidelines, and that the number contracting it will decrease.

We pray for those who are suffering in any way, physically, mentally or spiritually, and we especially pray for the continued healing of Val, Lorraine and Anthony.

We also lift to you Emma, who is going through a hard time at present. Let us take a moment to lift to you those known personally to us.

Lord we are sorry for the wrong things we have done this week, saying unkind things, gossiping or not doing something we should have done, but mostly Lord we are sorry if we have sometimes forgotten you, as you never forget us.

We pray for those around the world who are suffering under repressive governments, natural disasters violence and injustice. Thank you for those who are trying to right these wrongs and give them a platform to speak truth to power. Lord raise up honest brokers of peace. We thank you for those bringing the gospel to those who have not heard it, we ask your protection on them, and those who are persecuted, imprisoned and tortured for proclaiming their faith in you. Last week, 12 Christians were arrested in Iran, and we pray for their safety and early release. We pray too for the peace of Jerusalem.

We pray for our own country where our Judeo-Christian heritage is being replaced with secular humanism. We know that this land needs to repent and stop making laws that are not in accordance with your will before we will see revival. We thank you that the government have been able to help many financially since the pandemic outbreak, but we know that this cannot go on indefinitely and we ask for your provision for those who are going to lose their jobs and businesses. Give those in authority wisdom and compassion.

We ask your blessing on your family here at St. John's. We are excited about the person you have chosen to come and lead us. As the lock down eases we pray that you will keep contagion away from St. John's. There are many challenges for our church at this time, not least the financial commitments and for those who are able and would normally give their offering during the service, may they be able to put aside a small gift each week for when we resume proper services. Bless Andrew as he works on the church accounts.

We thank you for our wardens, Steve and Ian as they carry out the things that are still necessary. Thank you that the food bank is still able to operate, and that donations are covering the current needs. Thank you also that the CAP centre is still operating and bless those who are struggling to be free from debt.

Lord, bless us during the coming week until we can zoom in again next Sunday and especially bless those who are isolated and lonely.

We ask these things in the name of Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Thank you for listening and God bless.