

Sunday 16th August 2020

How wide and long and high and deep – Isaiah 45:18-25, Ephesians 3:14-21

Talk by Russell Jones, Prayers by Margaret Davies

Good morning. Welcome to St John's zoom service. Margaret will lead us in our prayers this morning, and I will read the passages for today, which are from Isaiah chapter 45 and Ephesians chapter 3.

Last week we heard how we can approach God freely with confidence, having been taken into his family. To introduce today's service, I'll read from Philippians where Paul reflects on this when his own circumstances are difficult.

'I have learned the secret of being content in any and in every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.'

Let's pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you that you strengthen us, that you sent your spirit to live in us and help us. We invite you now into our church gathering and ask you to speak to us in these difficult times. Amen.

Now Margaret will lead us in our prayers.

Before we pray for others, because we let God down all the time, let's confess, repent and receive forgiveness.

Lord God, our maker and redeemer, we have wilfully misused your gifts of creation, we have seen the ill treatment of others and have not gone to their aid, we have condoned evil and dishonesty and failed to strive for justice, we have heard the good news of Christ but failed to share it with others. We have not loved you with all our heart nor our neighbours as ourselves. Lord, we confess and repent. Please be merciful and forgive us our sin. Amen

Lord God, we thank you for forgiving us through the death of your son Jesus Christ and now strengthen us to live in the power of your Spirit all our days. Now we pray for so many of our world's needs.

Almighty God, everyone is affected by the pandemic. We pray for so many who are ill. Please heal them. We pray for those who are bereaved. Please comfort them. We pray that all people will behave responsibly by obeying the rules and regulations to keep safe and control the virus. Bless with wisdom and guidance the governments, authorities, leaders and scientists to make the correct decisions.

Lord, we bring to you our concerns for so many countries where war and violence occur. We pray that mindsets of enmity, greed and corruption will be changed. Please give your mercy and justice, Lord God to our troubled world. Bless all those who are affected by the aftermath of the explosion in Beirut, the Summer fires and accidents, floods and droughts.

Bring comfort to the bereaved, healing to the injured and good international aid to the devastated, homeless and hungry. Give all the agencies the resources that are needed,

Our Heavenly Father, we pray for the world wide church. You teach us through your word, the Bible, which we are reminded of today to trust in your promises, the enormity of your love and the gift of your Spirit. We pray that we and the church, its leaders and members will live on your foundation and spread this news to our needy world.

We thank you Lord for world mission partners, still working in different ways at present, especially for Jason and Tracey Day in Thailand. They thank God for villagers outside Chiang Mai bringing food from their farm lands for destitute town's people. Tracey, Ruby and Libby are helping their school and church giving out food and assistance. They thank God too for their supporters giving enough for their own housing need and school fees. Bless Jason with a high, challenging job, deputising for his manager at present. Thank you and bless Jenny Archibald and all those working to support refugees in great need.

O Lord, we pray for and thank you for our church fellowship. Bless all our leaders, council and members. Give us all the energy and your Spirit to continue your work here through our online services, prayer times, church opening, food bank, CAP, home groups and the school. May your kingdom be extended here.

Please heal, comfort and support any one in need who we know personally as we ask you now [Pause]

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen

A reading from Isaiah 45 verses 18 to 25.

¹⁸ For this is what the LORD says –

he who created the heavens,

he is God;

he who fashioned and made the earth,

he founded it;

he did not create it to be empty,

but formed it to be inhabited –

he says:

‘I am the LORD,

and there is no other.

¹⁹ I have not spoken in secret,

from somewhere in a land of darkness;

I have not said to Jacob’s descendants,

“Seek me in vain.”

I, the LORD, speak the truth;

I declare what is right.

²⁰ ‘Gather together and come;

assemble, you fugitives from the nations.

Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood,

who pray to gods that cannot save.

²¹ Declare what is to be, present it –

let them take counsel together.

Who foretold this long ago,

who declared it from the distant past?

Was it not I, the LORD?

And there is no God apart from me,

a righteous God and a Saviour;

there is none but me.

²² ‘Turn to me and be saved,

all you ends of the earth;

for I am God, and there is no other.

²³ By myself I have sworn,

my mouth has uttered in all integrity

a word that will not be revoked:

before me every knee will bow;

by me every tongue will swear.

²⁴ They will say of me, “In the LORD alone

are deliverance and strength.”

All who have raged against him

will come to him and be put to shame.

²⁵ But all the descendants of Israel

will find deliverance in the LORD

and will make their boast in him.

Ephesians chapter 3 verses 14 to 21

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family^[a] in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

This is the word of the Lord – **thanks be to God.**

Isaiah reminds us that there are two ways of seeing. The first way, the one which we mostly use, is to be logical, to count up, to assess what has happened, and then make a deduction based on the evidence. For example, this way of seeing would notice the following evidence: God helped Israel defeat their enemies and conquer the Promised Land, against all the odds; God saved Israel many times against overwhelming enemy forces. Deduction equals: God was on Israel's side.

Or, at the time when this prophecy was made: the evidence - Israel has been defeated, the people sent into exile, Jerusalem destroyed, God's Temple obliterated, and the Promised Land has been emptied. Deduction: God has abandoned Israel, or 'God is not as strong as Babylonian gods'.

A different way of seeing is this: trust that God will keep his ancient promises. God had warned, through the prophets, what would happen - and those things did happen. Verse 19 – He reminds his people 'I have not spoken in secret'. Now he promises he is about to restore and to save his people. 'I am the Lord, there is no other'. Who or What else can be trusted?

God doesn't only remind them of past promises and warnings here. He goes back to his nature, and to his intention for his chosen people. He formed the land to be inhabited. Therefore, it was his purpose to bring his people back to the land he had promised. It is his will to bring us into the spiritual land he has promised. That will never change and we can always trust it, even when things are tough. Verse 21 asks 'Who foretold this long ago...from the distant past? Was it not I, the Lord, a righteous God and a Saviour?'

Salvation is immediately mentioned again as God commands: 'Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other'. This was the verse that converted Charles Spurgeon, the great Victorian minister, when he was seeking God. From the ends of the earth, wherever we start, we are called to the same home. We all die. We all have a God-shaped hole in us. 'Turn to me, and be saved, for there is no other'. The spiritual

view, the Christian view, sees God promising and then achieving his purpose, and this promise stretches into the future too. In the passage from Ephesians we see that Paul wrote 'how wide and high and long and deep is the love of Christ', and we see it in this passage from Isaiah too. How wide – well, God calls from 'all the ends of the earth'. How high – he calls to all the descendants of Israel, and that includes all the people saved by Christ's death at the cross; how long – God created and fashioned the earth; how deep – how deep is God's love, and how deeply we can acquire it through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

There are times when we can't understand how God is working to his purpose, or why it is painful, but we can trust that he is bringing us close to him when we obey. He wants to fill us with love. This connects the two passages.

'In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength' said Isaiah. Paul's words in Ephesians are also about strength, and like the Isaiah prophecy, end with exultation in God's glory.

When in verse 15 it speaks of 'the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name', we are to see that we all share some of the Father's characteristics and nature. Through his fatherhood he has passed on some of his genes, if you like, so all are named after God the Father. All human fatherhood is a partial image of God's relation to us. We're not naturally children of God though – Ep 2.2-3 says 'at one time we were gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature...we were by nature objects of wrath' – but God is our creator and our saviour through Christ, so that we can receive the inheritance of 'his glorious riches' (verse 16).

Paul is praying and pleading with God here. He begins 'I kneel before the Father' which was unusual because people then stood when they prayed. The requests in his prayer lead from one to the other. 1. Accepting God's salvation leads 2. to the Spirit inhabiting us, and then 3. the Spirit empowers us to live fully. The Power of the Spirit is given from God's 'glorious riches' so there is a huge supply of it! Using the word 'riches' draws our attention to the contrast between physical and spiritual wealth. Follow the process through in the passage: where does the power go, where are the riches stored? And you can see the answer is 'in your inner being'; that's the part of us where God dwells and works. You might think of communion as feeding that part of God inside you with bread and wine. An inner being can be exercised, fed and watered, can grow in strength and life, but the outer being is always ageing and perishing. The outer being can't be renewed, not even with liposuction and implants. Hebrews chapter 5 talks about leaving the 'milk' of basic teachings about righteousness and moving onto adult 'solid food' as a picture of how faith grows and Christ dwells within us. Here in verse 17 when it says that 'Christ may dwell in your hearts', it means that Christ 'settles down' in the tent of our weak, perishing bodies, feels at home in our inner selves. As he feels at home, and he puts his feet up, he becomes part of the family, joins in with the decisions and influences what we do. Shall I pray? He says yes. Shall I worship God? He says yes. Shall I read the Bible? He says well, you know what.

This leads to us being 'rooted and established in love', which is a picture of our essential selves reaching into the depth of God's love. A tree needs deep roots to grow in strength and be steady in its environment, and we have to reach into God's love, in order to power our faith, which lets us live fully for God. 'Established' isn't a plant world reference but an

architectural one. It pictures our foundations. To build, you need a deep foundation, and the more substantial the building you put up, the deeper the foundations you will need. The deeper our experience of Christ, the more solid our foundations will be, to sustain us when the storm blows against our lives. You might think of Jesus' parable about the two builders in Matthew chapter 7. Physical foundations can be measured but the depth of God cannot. It passes understanding – it is limitless. We always have enough spiritual resources if we pray and search deeply for them, and then we will be 'filled to the measure of all the fullness of God'.

The passage ends in verses 20-21 with a blessing of praise that emphasises this limitless nature again, including in the dimension of time; 'to him who is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine...throughout all generations'. To him be glory; don't be shy to reach into the depths of God's love, to ask for the power of the spirit to live and grow in you, and to sustain you.

To end our service a short blessing from the book of Jude.

'To Him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy, to the only God our saviour be glory majesty authority and power through Jesus Christ our Lord before all ages now and for evermore. Amen.'

Have an enjoyable and holy week. Goodbye.