

Service 11th July 2021

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his saints;
but let them not turn back to folly.

Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.

Yes, the LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way.

Psalm 85:8-13

Hymn [*Let all the world in every corner sing*](#) (StF 57, HP 10)

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we join with all creation in acclaiming you as God, high over all.

Works of power declare your greatness. Things of beauty testify to a God who delights in good things. The vastness of creation humbles us, so we ask "When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, what is man that you are mindful of him?" We seem so tiny, so insignificant. We are like fleeting visitors, minor characters on the stage of history.

But you made us in your own image. You formed us for your glory and for your service. We draw near solely because you invite us; you make us welcome.

In Jesus you have drawn close to us. In his life and teaching and in his wonderful works we see the love of God revealed. We experience for ourselves his tender compassion. In his death we find our only hope of redemption and rescue, the forgiveness of our sin. In his resurrection you have opened the way of life for every believer, and in that we rejoice.

In fulfilment of his promise, send your Holy Spirit to us, to bear witness with our spirit that we are born anew, born of God. Send him to equip us to do your will, to serve and confess Jesus Christ as Lord. Send him to renew and transform our nature, until Christ is formed in us.

So may our time of prayer and worship refresh us, and honour you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Read: [Mark 6: 14 - 29](#)

Hymn [*The kingdom of God is justice and joy*](#) (StF 255, HP 139)

Reflection

The death of John the Baptist really is a most appalling story, but a few moments' thought will remind you how up-to-date it is too. There have been far too many instances of political leaders murdering those who have been brave enough to challenge and criticize their conduct.

Poor John! we instinctively cry. What a terrible fate and sad reward for your courage and your stand for righteousness. We don't suffer that fate for saying Boris Johnson's adultery was beyond excuse, or calling out Prince Charles for making a mistress of another man's wife. (Yes: there are plenty more examples in public life...) It is equally wrong that a Methodist Minister abandoned his wife and child to move in with another man (name withheld, but I trained with him).

Our instincts protest that, surely, God ought to have protected John and rescued him from the sword. Does God not care about justice and righteousness? Does he turn a blind eye at injustice and at wickedness in high places?

Then, perhaps, we recall how from earliest days “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.” Love for truth and loyalty to Jesus did not save the Reformers from the flames, did not keep John Bunyan out of Bedford Gaol. In the 20th century it saw Dietrich Bonhoeffer hanged in a Concentration Camp, and Archbishop Janani Luwum murdered by direct order of Idi Amin, and Archbishop Romero murdered in his cathedral. The 20th century saw more Christians martyred than the previous 19 combined, and it is claimed that an average of thirteen people die for their Christian faith every day. Where is God while all this happens?

Why do the wicked ‘get away with it’? whether on the scale of Herod in this story, or the domestic violence that rarely reaches court, or financial shenanigans in business: justice seems far away.

Why do “the righteous” seem to suffer so appallingly? Does God not honour those who honour him? (That, after all, was the verse of Scripture handed to Eric Liddell just before winning the Olympic Gold Medal, as depicted in *Chariots of Fire*). Three weeks ago we read about the disciples waking Jesus during the storm, with the question, “Don’t you care?” As St Teresa is reported to have said to God, “It’s no wonder you have so few friends, if this is the way you treat them!”

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” And he meant it. It seems a bleak answer. It hardly seems to fit John’s experience. What comfort lies there for those who are suffering in a multitude of ways? Doesn’t it feel like the old jibe of ‘Pie in the sky when you die’?

Of course, the Bible is a much more realistic book than the text-books or the newspapers. It faced that question centuries ago. The story of Job is a lengthy demolition of the idea that goodness will automatically be rewarded, or that suffering is always God’s punishment for sin. Psalm 37 seems to suggest that sort of simplistic view:

I have been young, and now am old,
yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging bread.
The LORD loves justice; he will not forsake his saints.

They are preserved for ever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off. (verses 25, 28)

Where has the writer been looking! Christian Aid can point him to plenty of examples to put him straight – and so could Job.

But another Psalm answers with a healthy dose of realism. Psalm 73 wrestles with the question that distressed Job:

I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. (verses 3-5)

They say, “How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?”

Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. (verses 11-12)

Psalm 73 describes Herod’s court more accurately than Psalm 37, I think. But the writer has not finished – it’s well worth reading the whole of the psalm. In verses 16-19 he discovers a fresh perspective as he worships God:

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.

Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.

How they are swept away in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!

We notice that although Herod had the messenger murdered, he could not silence his own guilty conscience. “Truly conscience makes cowards of us all,” said Shakespeare. It is, as the Book of Proverbs reminds us, “the candle of the LORD.”

As is so regularly the case, Jesus himself provides the ultimate example. There can be no question about sin in him. The sin for which he suffered and died was yours and mine. Alone in human

history, he was totally free from guilt – not just innocent of the charges brought against him. And if he had not died on the cross, then our hope would be utterly lost. When we protest about the sufferings of the innocent we may be sure that he knows, he understands, and he cares.

The letter to the Hebrews insists that “it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment,” and Paul writes that “we must all stand before the judgment-seat of God.” Herod, Hitler etc will have no answer there. But Jesus has covered our sin by his death, and lives for ever to intercede for us. (As he has for his cousin John).

Prayer

Almighty God, we remember before you all those who suffer for doing what is right.

For some it may be just the scorn of people around them; it may be being overlooked for promotion at work; it may be dismissal for not conforming to ‘political correctness.’

In other countries our brothers and sisters in Christ lose their homes, have their children forcibly removed, endure malicious accusations and prosecutions; they are imprisoned, tortured, and killed, because they profess the same faith as us.

We pray for those who speak truth to power, who dare to hold out an alternative vision of acting justly and loving mercy and walking humbly with God.

We pray for those who live with misunderstanding at home, as the only Christian believer in the household.

We are also prompted by this story to pray for those who hold power, that they may use it wisely and may act with integrity. Especially we pray that – as the country awaits announcements about the easing and lifting of Covid restrictions – that this will not lead to complacency or the irresponsible behaviour that will flood hospitals with infections and overrun our doctors.

We pray for our Church after the Conference took momentous decisions. While some rejoice, others feel deeply isolated. Help us to move forward together, holding our views with integrity and our love with sincerity.

We sum up our prayers in the words of

The Lord’s Prayer

Hymn [*O for a heart to praise my God*](#) (StF 507, HP 536)

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore. Amen.