

**Christchurch On-Line Service**  
**15<sup>th</sup> November 2020 @ 10:45**

**Order of Service**

- ❖ Welcome and Call to Worship
- ❖ Hymn – StF 48 ‘From the highest of heights’
- ❖ Opening Prayers
- ❖ Introduction to Bible Reading
- ❖ 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
- ❖ Hymn – StF 633 ‘My soul find rest in God alone’
- ❖ Reflection
- ❖ Prayers for Others
- ❖ The Lord’s Prayer.
- ❖ Blessing
- ❖ Hymn – StF 545 ‘Be thou my vision’

**Welcome and Call to Worship**

Welcome to this morning’s act of worship from Christchurch, Hitchin. My name is Helen Dearn and I am a Local Preacher within the North Hertfordshire Methodist Circuit. To those of you who join us regularly, occasionally, or have stumbled across us through a YouTube search – know that you are all very welcome.

This morning our Bible Reading will be read by Sue, Steve is leading our team of musicians and Tony is the technical master working behind the scenes. My grateful thanks to you all for making this service possible.

So, let us prepare for worship with some words from Psalm 90: 1-2,17.

**Lord, you have been our dwelling-place  
Throughout all generations.  
Before the mountains were born  
Or you brought forth the earth and the world,  
From everlasting to everlasting you are God.**

**May the favour of the Lord our God rest upon us:  
Establish the work of our hands for us –  
Yes, establish the work of our hands.**

And so, let us praise our indescribable, uncontainable God through our first hymn:

## **Hymn – StF 48 ‘From the highest of heights’**

*Indescribable, uncontainable  
You placed the stars in the sky  
And You know them by name  
You are amazing, God  
All powerful, untameable  
Awestruck, we fall to our knees  
As we humbly proclaim  
You are amazing, God*

From the highest of heights  
To the depths of the sea  
Creation's revealing Your majesty  
From the colours of Fall  
To the fragrance of Spring  
Every creature unique  
And the song that it sings  
All exclaiming –

*Indescribable, uncontainable  
You placed the stars in the sky  
And You know them by name  
You are amazing, God  
All powerful, untameable  
Awestruck, we fall to our knees  
As we humbly proclaim  
You are amazing, God*

Who has told every lightning bolt  
Where it should go?  
Or seen heavenly storehouses  
Laden with snow?  
Who imagined the sun  
And gives source to its light?  
Yet conceals it to bring us the  
coolness of night  
None can fathom...

*Indescribable, uncontainable  
You placed the stars in the sky  
And You know them by name  
You are amazing, God  
All powerful, untameable  
Awestruck, we fall to our knees  
As we humbly proclaim  
You are amazing, God*

Indescribable, uncontainable  
You placed the stars in the sky  
And You know them by name  
You are amazing, God  
Incomparable, unchangeable  
You see the depths of my heart  
And you love me the same  
You are amazing, God

## **Opening Prayers**

All-powerful, unchangeable God,  
You have blessed us with so much  
And reveal yourself to us through the colours and variety of creation  
Through the loving care of family and friends  
Through the persistence and courage of strangers  
Who allow us a glimpse of the divine  
Within the cloak of humanity.  
For this we offer you our praise and our adoration  
For you truly are our amazing God  
Who loves each and every one of us  
With a love that we can only grasp at understanding.

Yet, Lord, we so often reject that love  
And turn away from the hand that is held out to us  
Denying ourselves the comfort and joy of your mercy and grace  
By going our own way and arrogantly believing  
That we know better, can do better, are better.

Lord, forgive our pride and disobedience  
That causes harm to others and to ourselves  
And deeply hurts you too.  
And so, in a moment of silence,  
We offer up our true confession and repentance  
And seek your freely offered forgiveness once more.

*Silence*

Lord, you promise to welcome back all who turn to you  
And for that we bring you not just our praise, but also our grateful thanks.  
Thank you that in Jesus we find our Friend and our Saviour.  
Thank you that through the power of your Holy Spirit  
We find our Comforter, our Advocate and our Guide.  
Thank you that in you we find all power, wisdom and unconditional love.  
So fill us anew, refresh and revitalise us  
So that we can truly be your disciples  
And be the children of light you call us to be.

Amen.

### **Introduction to Bible Reading**

Our Bible passage this morning comes from Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica, a city in what is now modern day Greece that was situated at the crossroads of 2 major trade routes. Paul had established a church there during his second missionary journey and this letter was written somewhere around AD 50-53 - making it possibly the earliest writing we have in the New Testament.

The church in Thessalonica was young and the believers were struggling with persecution for their faith as well as misunderstandings around the second coming of Christ. Some thought that Christ's return was imminent and were becoming confused that loved ones were dying before this return happened. So, Paul sends them this letter to offer comfort, support and encouragement.

He praises the Christians in Thessalonica for their faithfulness and good reputation and reminds them of the hope that is found in Jesus Christ. He then challenges them to continue to please God in their daily living by avoiding sexual immorality, loving each other and living as good citizens in a sinful world. He also offers comfort by reminding them of the promises of the resurrection as we will hear in a moment.

Although the passage starts with talk of the day of judgement, Paul quickly turns to the fact that the Thessalonian believers are children of light not dark and so do not need to fear this judgement. He also reassures his readers that they, and we, need to be ready for Christ's second coming at all times, but that when that day arrives all Christians who are alive and those who have died will be raised to new life. Paul then exhorts the Thessalonian Christians to support and encourage each other as they grow in their faith and knowledge, so that they can share their faith with others.

## 1 Thessalonians 5

### The Message

*5<sup>1-3</sup> I don't think, friends, that I need to deal with the question of when all this is going to happen. You know as well as I that the day of the Master's coming can't be posted on our calendars. He won't call ahead and make an appointment any more than a burglar would. About the time everybody's walking around complacently, congratulating each other—"We've sure got it made! Now we can take it easy!"—suddenly everything will fall apart. It's going to come as suddenly and inescapably as birth pangs to a pregnant woman.*

*4-8 But friends, you're not in the dark, so how could you be taken off guard by any of this? You're sons of Light, daughters of Day. We live under wide open skies and know where we stand. So let's not sleepwalk through life like those others. Let's keep our eyes open and be smart. People sleep at night and get drunk at night. But not us! Since we're creatures of Day, let's act like it. Walk out into the daylight sober, dressed up in faith, love, and the hope of salvation.*

*9-11 God didn't set us up for an angry rejection but for salvation by our Master, Jesus Christ. He died for us, a death that triggered life. Whether we're awake with the living or asleep with the dead, we're alive with him! So speak encouraging words to one another. Build up hope so you'll all be together in this, no one left out, no one left behind. I know you're already doing this; just keep on doing it.*

The people of Thessalonica were struggling, facing persecution and questioning what they had been taught, particularly in regards to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. We too face our own struggles and doubts, but our next hymn reminds us that we find all we need in God alone for God gives us rest for our souls and as such we cannot be shaken.

## **Hymn – StF 633 ‘My soul find rest in God alone’**

My soul finds rest in God alone,  
my rock and my salvation;  
a fortress strong against my foes,  
and I will not be shaken.  
Though lips may bless and hearts may  
curse,  
though lies like arrows pierce me,  
I'll fix my heart on righteousness,  
I'll look to him who hears me.

*O praise him, hallelujah,  
my delight and my reward;  
everlasting, never failing,  
my Redeemer, my God.*

My soul finds rest in God alone  
amid the world's temptations;  
when evil seeks to take a hold  
I'll cling to my salvation.  
Though riches come and riches go,  
don't set your heart upon them;  
the fields of hope in which I sow  
are harvested in heaven.

*O praise him, hallelujah,  
my delight and my reward;  
everlasting, never failing,  
my Redeemer, my God.*

I'll set my gaze on God alone  
and trust in him completely;  
with every day pour out my soul  
and he will prove his mercy.  
Though life is but a fleeting breath,  
a sigh too brief to measure,  
my King has crushed the curse of  
death  
and I am his forever.

*O praise him, hallelujah,  
my delight and my reward;  
everlasting, never failing,  
my Redeemer, my God.*

## **Reflection**

The lectionary readings for this week are all really rather challenging. There's talk of God's wrath, of judgement and of being called to account. The Gospel Reading from Matthew's Gospel is of the Parable of the Talents where the servants who use the money they were given are rewarded, but the servant who simply buried his gift in the ground is punished and has everything taken away from him. It is passages like these that I can see lead to sermons about hellfire and brimstone!

However, as I'm sure you'll be relieved to know, that is not what I want to focus on today. It was the very last verse of the passage Sue read to us that really struck me and got me thinking. The NIV version reads like this: "*Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing*". However, I really liked how Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message: "*So speak encouraging words to one another. Build up hope so you'll all be together in this, no one left out, no one left behind. I know you're already doing this; just keep on doing it*".

So let's try and unpack some of these words of advice from Paul and consider how they might be relevant to us today. Firstly, Paul wants us to encourage each other. Encouragement is often an undervalued gift, yet in Romans 12:8 Paul actually lists it as one of the spiritual gifts given to build up the body of Christ. But what is encouragement and how should it be shared?

I certainly don't think it's about being a sort of 'cheerleader', standing on the sidelines and simply shouting out our support. No, I think real encouragement needs to be something much deeper and is based in relationships and understanding. Encouragement needs to accept that we as individuals are all in different places and our needs, desires, struggles and fears are all different. If we are to encourage others, we are called to come alongside them where they are and journey with them to where they hope to be. Acknowledging and accepting the current situation as it is understood by the other person is vital and requires us to spend a lot more time listening than speaking. However, when we seek to step into their shoes and see the world from their perspective, we can begin to offer encouragement that is helpful, empowering and which can be accepted as worthwhile and valuable.

For some that might be a short journey that requires little of us, but for others that might be for the long haul. But, please never underestimate the power of encouragement. I know how, in my own story, simple words of interest and encouragement, of empathy and compassion, have helped me journey forwards through challenging times where words of advice and instruction might have failed. So, we are called to consider whom we can come alongside and encourage in their daily walk; whom we can empower and help grow not just in faith, but in personal development so that they can run the race that is set before them. Oh, and we are also called to accept that we each need the encouragement of others and to receive their gift with grace and humility.

Paul then exhorts us to build up hope so that we are all together in this. I love the idea that no one is to be left out or left behind. The Greek word Paul uses here is "*oikodomeo*", a word usually associated with the building trade; of the building of a house, a barn, a factory for example. Such construction requires planning, it requires different skills from different people, it requires collaboration, co-operation and commitment. This is not a one-off event, but an on-going effort to ensure that no one is excluded, no one is lost.

In these pandemic times, that is even more of a challenge as we cannot be together in ways we have always known. Technology is amazing and I am so grateful that God has blessed us with the intelligence and abilities to create such means of connecting without being physically together. But, technology is not accessible to everyone and we must be so careful that digital exclusion does not leave those, probably the more vulnerable amongst us, outside the fold. Therefore, we need to question how we can reach out and offer that encouragement to those who feel isolated and maybe even forgotten.

Whilst my work still allows me to meet with people face-to-face, if socially distanced and wearing a face mask, I have really discovered the power of a telephone call where my opening questions are that I want to know how the person on the other end is coping. Giving people an opportunity to talk and to be there to listen can be very powerful and also very humbling as I am offered an insight into the challenges people are facing and the courage with which they are doing so. Sometimes I can offer practical help, but a listening ear and words of encouragement are more often than not what are needed most.

And, don't forget the power of a letter. Today we heard words from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Just think how poorer our New Testament would be without all those letters, that have been read and re-read, studied, debated and treasured for over 2,000 years. One of my clients recently discovered some letters from when she and her late husband were courting and she has become immersed in this story of her past as she reads these letters over and over again. This lady lives with dementia and struggles with many day-to-day activities, but these letters remind her of a precious time in her life. Yes, they bring tears at times, but letters are tangible things that can be poured over time and time again, and hold within them words of hope, of encouragement and of not being forgotten.

Finally, Paul celebrates the fact that encouraging each other and building each other up is something that the believers in Thessalonica were already doing. He wasn't asking them to start something new; he was rejoicing in the fact that the work was already being undertaken and simply supporting them in keeping going. So often we can focus on the challenges and the need for fresh approaches rather than looking at what is working well and what, maybe with the odd tweak or two, is proving successful and needs to be continued.

Maybe what we do need is to remind ourselves of one of the most important facts about being Christians – the fact that we are not in this alone. We are a community of believers, called to support each other, and to accept the support from others too. We are not called to navigate all that life throws at us alone, but rather to reach out to each other and encourage each other as we work together for God's glory and to build his kingdom here on earth. And let us all be encouraged and rest on the promise of eternal salvation as sons of Light and daughters of Day, living life under wide open skies and knowing where we stand –as children of God, blessed, beloved and redeemed.

Amen.

### **Prayers for Others**

Lord, you call us to be people of the Day, dressed up in faith, love and the hope of salvation. As such we bring you our prayers for the world around us, knowing that you hear all we ask and trusting in your abundant love and grace to respond as we need, not as we want.

We lift before you our Government and Parliament as they wrestle with the challenges of Covid-19, of Brexit talks, of the day-to-day issues that have never gone away. Help disparate voices to be heard, not in argument, but so that all points of view can be considered. Help those making decisions to listen and be open to new ideas and ways of thinking. Bless them with your wisdom and empower them to seek the common good, not selfish ambition and help them offer encouragement and insight, not correction and disregard.

We ask your blessing upon the people of America as the ramifications of the recent Election start to unfold. Lord, we trust that your hand is upon this and that you will bring forth those who speak your truths in a way that can be heard and accepted.

Encourage those who have been elected or re-elected to hear your voice and be guided in your ways so that it is your will that is done.

Lord, we thank you for the gifts you have given us that enable us to investigate, create, research and produce. The hope that is in the newly announced vaccine for Covid-19 is so exciting and we thank all those who have been involved at each and every stage of the process so far. We ask you to continue to encourage those who are working on other vaccines and solutions so we can have a number of tools in our toolbox that maybe will not just work against this virus, but also give insights into other conditions in ways that might be unexpected and unanticipated.

We ask your blessing upon all the communities to which we belong – family, friends, church, school, work, neighbourhoods – especially in these socially distanced times. Alert us to those who need our presence and our encouragement and show us how to come alongside them in the ways they need. Open us up as well to accepting the support and encouragement of others – gifts are to be given away and that requires someone to accept them. Help us receive and give graciously and with humility, as the children of light you call us to be.

Finally, Lord, we ask your blessing upon ourselves and upon those closest to us. In a moment of silence, let us lift up to you those people or situations that are particularly laid upon our hearts at this time. *Silence.* Lord, you are our hope and our salvation. May we rest in these truths and be encouraged to continue to run the race that is set before us, knowing we are not alone but have each other and, most importantly of all, have you on our side.

Thank you, Loving Lord. Receive these prayers and the prayers of our hearts in trust and love and hope, and in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

So, as a community of faith let's encourage each other as we say the Lord's Prayer together. Please use whichever version and language you prefer, but do join in with me in saying:

Our Father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread  
And forgive us our sins  
As we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
And deliver us from evil  
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours  
Now and forever.  
Amen.

## **Blessing**

As we go from this time of worship,  
May we know that we are your beloved children  
Your sons of light and your daughters of day.  
Be with us as we shine that light  
And offer encouragement to those in need  
Building each other up and ensuring  
That no one is left out or left behind.

And may we do this secure in the knowledge  
That we go in the power of God –  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Today and every day,  
Amen.

## **Hymn – StF 545 ‘Be thou my vision’**

Be thou my vision,  
O Lord of my heart,  
be all else but naught to me,  
save that thou art;  
be thou my best thought  
in the day and the night,  
both waking and sleeping,  
thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom,  
be thou my true word,  
be thou ever with me,  
and I with thee, Lord;  
be thou my great Father,  
thy child let me be;  
be thou in me dwelling,  
and I one with thee.

Be thou my breastplate,  
my sword for the fight;  
be thou my whole armour,  
be thou my true might;  
be thou my soul’s shelter,  
be thou my strong tower:  
O raise thou me heavenward,  
great Power of my power.

Riches I heed not,  
nor earth’s empty praise:  
be thou mine inheritance  
now and always;  
be thou and thou only  
the first in my heart:  
O Sovereign of heaven,  
my treasure thou art.

High king of Heaven,  
thou heaven’s bright Sun,  
O grant me its joys  
after victory is won;  
Great Heart of my own heart,  
whatever befall,  
still be thou my vision,  
O Ruler of all.