

Home Worship for July 2023

2nd July

Revd Becky Jarratt

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who is, and was, and is to come.”

Read Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4

In our readings today, we hear of some fantastic visions! Ezekiel and the Apostle John had visions that contained similar images, some 700 years apart. There are many fascinating elements described, but today we are going to explore the role of the living creatures we heard about.

In Revelation 1 we can read that it was the Lord God that John was seeing. Of course, as an apostle, John had known the Lord while He was here on earth, and it must have been incredible to see Him in such a vision many years after He departed this life. In Chapter 4, the Lord was sitting on the throne, and had around him these four living creatures. Each creature was different, but they all had certain things in common. They had six wings and many eyes. They were repeating words that we may be familiar with: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who is, and was, and is to come.”



This part of the vision occurs before the devastating happenings that show parts of our lives ripped apart. It is a reminder that the Lord is always with us and will always protect us. The four living creatures represent what is protecting the deep inner sense of the Word. We are told in the Writings that the Lord will not allow us to accidentally profane.

What is profanation? Words with similar meanings are desecration, debasement and defilement. If we desecrate something, we deprive it of its sacred character. We treat it with abuse, irreverence or contempt. Both profanation and desecration can have serious spiritual consequences. In HH 456:3 we can read that desecration is believing in something and then denying it:

“The only people who can desecrate what is true and good, or the holy things of the Word and the church, are people who have first acknowledged them, all the more if they have lived by them, and later fall away from their faith, deny them, and live for themselves and the world.”

In reality, if we acknowledge what we have learnt about loving the Lord and our neighbour and make it part of ourselves, then deny this truth, we are profaning. Another way of looking at it is knowing in our hearts what is good and true but deliberately going against it. In doing this, we are effectively communicating with the heavens and the hells at the same time.

If we did not know the truths in the first place, or had not accepted them into our ways of thinking or being, we would not be desecrating them. By not allowing those who wish harm for the Word access to its truths, the four living creatures protect the deepest parts of the Word, and they cannot be damaged.

There is spiritual warfare going on at all times in our world. We may not be aware that some of the choices we have to make are as a result of this warfare, but we can be safe in the knowledge that the Lord only wishes the best for us, and is with us at every step on our journey.

Task: Can you think of a truth you understood but found difficult to follow? Have you been able to overcome this? Has anything helped you to do this?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, we give thanks that you protect Your Word from accidental harm. We thank You for the opportunities you give us to love You and our neighbour. Help us to keep these loves at the centre of our mind over the coming week. Amen*

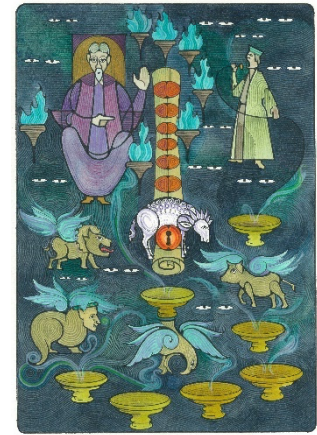
9th July

“Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?”

Read Isaiah 29 and Revelation 5

Are you someone who likes to read a good book or watch a good film more than once? Do you find you notice things you weren't aware of more with each reading or viewing? This can be the case with the Lord's Word – something we read on one occasion says something very different to us the next time we come across it.

In today's passages we read about a scroll that was sealed. We might like to think of a scroll as a book. If it had seven seals, as we read in Revelation 5, it would be completely impenetrable. We would not be able to read or understand it at all. This is how the Lord's Word was protected for many years because the human race was not ready to receive it.



One of the truths we learn as children is to love our neighbour as ourselves. As little ones, this can seem quite simple: we think of our neighbours as the people who live next door to us, or perhaps others on our road, and we need to be nice to them. As time goes on, the perception of a “neighbour” may grow wider. It may encompass people we are in regular contact with. We may try to care for our friends and close contacts.

As we grow older, it becomes a little more complicated. How do we love someone as ourselves? Well, if we like to do something, the people around us will like that, too. But is that always the case? Just because we might like to play loud music, do our neighbours also appreciate it? We may start to realise that not everyone likes the same thing, and, actually, we can turn it around. We might think about what we don't like being done to us, and apply that to our interactions with other people.

Later, we may begin to think more carefully about who our neighbour might be. We may begin to realise that, actually, everyone is our neighbour. Not just people we know, not just those living in our country, but everyone in the whole world. And some of the things we do are not loving to others. This realisation may come in small ways, and we may feel challenged by them. Global warming is making life really difficult for those in third world countries who are more affected by the climate crisis than we are. But giving up things like single use plastics isn't always easy. Our love for the neighbour can be difficult to follow up on when we have to make enormous changes in the practicalities of our own lives.

The Lord does not let us know about these different levels of truth until we are ready to deal with them. As each of these things is revealed to us, it is like a seal from the scroll being removed. We start to understand in more and more depth about the Lord's truths and how we can apply them to our lives. When the seals are opened and the Word of God becomes more known to us, we see things inside and outside of us that we want to change. This can be very dramatic and can cause enormous upheaval in our lives.

Imagine every truth we have learnt in our lives being multi-layered. How much do we have to learn? The realisation that we need to change in order to grow spiritually is not an easy discovery. We can be very resistant to it, and sometimes need to learn the same lessons time and again before we are willing to listen to the Lord and follow His way. But, once we do, our lives become sweeter and more fulfilled. We reap the benefits in more ways than we can imagine.

Task: Think about a truth you learnt as a child. How has your understanding of it changed over the years? Are you willing to apply it to your life?

Prayer Lord, we thank You for the deeper understanding of Your Word that we receive when we are ready. Help us to work through any issues we might have by praying for Your guidance. Amen

16th July

“I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals.”
Read Matthew 23:13-29 and Revelation 6:1-8

Many who are not familiar with the Book of Revelation have often heard of “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”. They are a fascinating vision! Four horses, each with riders, carrying swords, scales and a flag. Who would not be captivated by this image?



We could think of the riders of the four horses as spiritual states that we might pass through. Our state can change as we move through different experiences, and we may feel very differently from morning to evening even on the same day. Sometimes our states are just the way the Lord would like them to be, but, at other times, things aren't as rosy.

The white horse and its rider represent the state we are in when we are receptive to the Lord's truths. When we are in this state, we welcome the opportunity to learn of and remedy the shortcomings that form part of our personalities. We wish to live in harmony with the teachings of the Lord's Word, and, because of this honest, humble mindset, these truths will be available to us. While we may find some areas challenging because they are not in accordance with what we believed previously, our will to change is strong enough to rise to these trials.

Think about what state we are in if we are the rider of the red horse. What state in us does it represent? While we may spend much of our time wishing only to follow the Lord, there will be times when we fall from this mark. We may take pleasure in knowing we were right in a particular situation, not appreciating that we have made the same mistakes on other occasions. We may use something we learn of in the Word to judge another person, rather than leaving that judgement to the Lord. We may find the speck in someone else's eye and yet ignore the plank in our own. When we are in this state, the only person we hurt is ourselves. Attending to our own faults, rather than those of others, is the only way to true happiness.

The third horse is black. As this is the opposite of white, we can quickly see that the truths the white horse represents are now hidden. The rider is carrying a pair of scales, and uses them to measure wheat and barley. He pays very low prices for them. This is showing us that he values what is good and true very little. From the reading from Matthew, we know that our Lord did not appreciate what the scribes and Pharisees were trying to do in elaborating on the laws of the Old Testament without ensuring their real meaning is taken on board. When we ignore the spirit of the law, we get into difficulties. But, for those who take on this state as their foremost one, the Lord's goodness and truth are protected because they are living in darkness and cannot see it.

The fourth and last horse is pale, and its rider is called “Death”. By the very fact that you are reading this, it is unlikely that you will often be in this state. This horse and rider represent those who have completely rejected the Lord's Word. Their only motivation is for themselves and their close friends and family. Because of this total rejection, the Lord cannot reach their souls. There is nothing for him to draw upon, and so they are spiritually dead.

We all spend time when we are not in a perfect state. We would not be human if this were not the case! We can try to take note of what causes us to move into a negative state, and ask for the Lord's help in those situations. He will help to bring us back to Him, if only we are willing.

Task: Think about times when your state is not of that of the white horse and its rider. How can you bring yourself back into the Lord's light?

Prayer Lord, we thank You for the opportunities you give us to see our faults and to mend our ways. Helps us to remember to look to you whenever we feel the influence of the hells coming in. Amen

23rd July

“...the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

Read Matthew 24:1-21 and Revelation 6:9-11

Have you had a situation in your life where you were rejected because you stood up for something you believed in? Or have you wished you had spoken up when others were behaving in a way you did not like?

In Matthew chapter 24 we read of the many things the world will have to face at the end of the age. Jesus gives them compelling warnings and frightening prophecies of the times to come. The disciples are urged not to believe in “false christs”, and are not to be troubled by rumour of war. In order to continue His work, the disciples must stay strong in their trust in the Lord.



This is a somewhat alarming passage, which is echoed in many places in the book of Revelation. Jesus was talking about the complete destruction of the temple. Inside this temple were the tablets of the Ten Commandments, meaning that the truth they held was completely destroyed. People would no longer have belief in the presence of the Lord.

However, there was still hope. There were a few loyal followers who would continue to live in the way our Lord taught us and stay true to Him. In the passage from Revelation, these followers are represented by the souls who were under the altar.

Some of you may be familiar with the concept of remains, or having a remnant of truth held within you that can be brought to light when it is most needed. We are given these remains from the time we are in the womb, through infancy, childhood and beyond, and these are kept safe within us, even when we have periods where the Lord is not central in our lives. They are “goods and truths stored away by the Lord in the interior man. They are brought out into the exterior or natural man when a person is in a state of goodness; but they are withdrawn and stored away again the moment he passes into a state of evil. They are withdrawn and stored away again to prevent them from being mixed up with evils and thereby destroyed.” AC 6156

These remains are like the foundations a house is built upon. We may not be aware of their presence, but they help to keep us firm. When strong winds blow and we are going through difficult times, our remains are there to keep us grounded and to stay robust in our beliefs.

In the western world today, we are far less likely to be persecuted for our beliefs than the early Christians were. But it can be subtler than that. Those who are committed to learning the Lord's truths are more likely to spot areas in which they are unhappy with the motivations of others.

When we are being challenged to stick by our beliefs, it can be a real temptation to give in, particularly if we feel alone in our sense of unease. We can be in situations where the right path to follow is not black or white. We can spend time asking ourselves if our difficulty is as a result of our ego wanting to take charge, or if there really is a problem with, say, the integrity of others. Standing up for what we know to be true can put us in a situation of vulnerability, and others can take advantage of this.

But we can trust in the Lord. We can read His Word and obey His commands. We can ask for strength to deal with difficult situations. And, if we are no longer welcome because we have been true to our beliefs, we can be safe in the knowledge that the Lord will never, ever leave us.

Task: Think about a time when you did not stand up for what you believed in. What were the circumstances? Could you do anything differently if this situation came up again?

Prayer Lord, thank You for the remains You hold within each one of us. Thank you for the opportunity to access them, and help us to be in a state where they are readily available. Amen

30th July

“I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake.”

Read Isaiah 2:6-22 and Revelation 6:12-17

Have you been through a time where it felt like your whole world was being shaken? Have you felt as though everything you could previously depend upon is either no longer there, or no longer true? For those who have experienced this, it may feel like a turbulent awakening: it is not pleasant, but necessary for us to follow the path of spiritual development.

In an earlier week we heard about the scroll, which we may like to think of as a book, which represents the Word of God. This time, “the heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up.” (Rev 6:14). What might it mean for us if the Lord’s Word was rolled up, or was now inaccessible? Our understanding of it is removed. We can no longer see or understand the truths that were once available to us. And this would, indeed, be a scary and unsettling time.



What we have come to understand through the opening of the other seals really comes home to us and we experience this apocalyptic awakening: a violent earthquake of our whole inner being.

In the same verse in Revelation, we hear about mountains. They symbolise higher states within us, such as love for the Lord and for other people. We are in those states when we are not thinking about what we will gain personally from a situation, but what we can offer to others.

Mountains are also a symbol of the Lord and all of the heavenly qualities that come from Him, such as love and charity. In AC 2242:2 we can read about the Lord, “He always dwells in highest things”. But we can also look at mountains from the opposite perspective. When we feel on top of the world, we can become judgemental about others and be full of superiority. We can go into a state of pride where we believe we know it all. And, of course, after pride comes a fall.

We read that, during the time of the earthquake in Revelation 6, everyone went and hid in caves. This means that they were lost. Their scrolls had rolled up: they no longer had enlightenment. Imagine being in a cave where rocks have fallen over you. You would be in complete darkness. The people in Revelation wanted their wrong-doings hidden from the Lord. They did not want to have to face the consequences. They represent people who are more interested in their own needs and worldly things than those who have a love for the Lord and those around them.

I was struck by verse 17 of Revelation 6: “For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?” Going through the great earthquake may feel like having all of the wrath of God upon us at once. But this is not the case – it is an illusion. What really happens is that we come to the realisation that much change within us is needed. We cannot go on in the way we did before. As much as we may strive to become more Christ-like, there are always times that we slip back into our old ways. We were born with flaws, and it can take a lifetime to break the habits that reside within us. It can be done by living a life of faith and caring from the Lord, but there are always new things to learn and experiences that can challenge us.

Task: Reflect back on a time of great difficulty in your life. Remember how it felt at the time of challenge, and how different you felt afterwards. What did you learn? How were you able to move forward?

Prayer Lord, thank You for being with us through the good times as well as the bad. Help us to feel Your presence even when we put ourselves in the dark caves. Amen

Blessing: Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. John 14:27

Given the choice of an apple/banana or a bar of chocolate - which would you choose?

Looking at the story of Adam and Eve – on the face of it, it appears to be a simple case of two people being tempted to disobey God. How many times are we tempted to follow our own path in life? Sometimes it can seem all too easy to do what we want without giving a thought to anything else. It is all too difficult to do what we should be doing, especially if it means having to give up something that seems much better. Coming to the choice between the apple/banana and the chocolate I'm guessing the chocolate is the popular choice. However we know that an apple/banana would be much better for us, but the temptation to have the chocolate instead can be very attractive and difficult to ignore. Sometimes the choices we make aren't about what is better but what we want and this is what God is trying to tell us in this story. Initially Adam and Eve live in ignorance of their nakedness, in ignorance there is anything else but to follow God, however along comes the snake, who, represents the lowest senses, that which does not consider anything of others but of self alone. The snake persuades Adam and Eve to eat from the tree that God forbids them to eat from.

How many times are we tempted to follow a path which is more about what we want than about anything else?

Also how many times have we been swayed by someone else into doing something we shouldn't perhaps do? It is so easy isn't it, to fall into these traps?

So they eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and they become aware of right and wrong. They perceive themselves to be naked and see this as something wrong and try to cover themselves up. This is like those times when we allow ourselves to be tempted into some wrongdoing and in realizing we have gone wrong, we are embarrassed and try to hide it. We realise that what we have done is erroneous but find it hard to admit this and so conceal it. This is so easy to do isn't it?

However there is a small positive in this story. Having eaten from the tree that God told them not to, Adam and Eve learn how to distinguish between right and wrong and can choose which path to follow. They have free will. This is something that we all value isn't it? Having the choice, ourselves, to decide which path to follow, which food we want to eat whether an apple/banana or chocolate, so we can move freely through life. However if we want to follow what God wants for us we need to temper this freedom with a set of rules or guides to follow.

I don't know about you but I really value having the freedom to make my own choices in life. I really appreciate that I am the one making decisions about what path I follow. However I am also aware that I truly value being on this journey with God. That, although I, ultimately, make the decisions, I am guided by God's love and hand; that I depend on Him for guidance as to which is the right path to follow. So although I have this valuable freedom I am always conscious of His influence on my decision making process.

So, although we have freedom to make our own choices, we do have to consider how we use that freedom. Clearly, in the case of the apple/banana or chocolate, it is simply a matter of choice and of whether we want to follow a healthy option or indulge ourselves. Clearly also the only person it affects is you. However when it comes to how our choices affect others this can change our decisions quite a bit. Following God's way we need to have respect for others and to consider how what we do affects them. This is about our conscience. If we follow our conscience, we consider what we do and what choices we make and what effect these choices have on us and on those around us.

So Adam and Eve moved from a process of being in ignorance of what was right and wrong and followed God totally unaware of any other choices, to a place where they became aware of choice and were clearly tempted to follow the wrong one. However in this choice they then became free to choose and were in freedom to continue their allegiance to God. So this story which can seem quite harsh, right at the

beginning of the Bible, is clearly showing us how to follow God freely and to make good decisions. So by following God's way we can live a life of true freedom; a freedom that is tempered by conscience and is truly wise.

Dear Lord, guide me to choose wisely and to endeavour to walk in your ways, conscious of the effect my choices have on others and to live a life following your path. Amen.

Moses

Read: Jonah 1 v1-16 & Exodus 3 v1-15

13th August 2023

I am sure we have all had times in our lives when we have had to do things we weren't keen to do; maybe because it involved having to give bad news to someone, because it was hard work or because it meant going outside our comfort zone.

It is never easy to take on a task when you dread having to do it. I can remember when I was a nurse I used to be very anxious if I had to phone relatives to give them bad news when their loved one died, or being called into my Manager's office and wondering if it was because I'd done something wrong.

Recall a time when this has happened to you and reflect on how it made you feel.

We can find all sorts of excuses why we shouldn't complete a task we are called to do, or respond to a call to do that, oh so difficult challenge, just like Jonah, for example, who didn't want to go to Nineveh and fulfil the task the Lord wanted him to do (ie speak to them about their wicked ways) and chose to go to Tarshish instead. Of course we know what happens then don't we? He gets swallowed by a great fish.

In our story today Moses had every reason to be hesitant about the task the Lord wants him to do. Moses grew up being cared for by Pharaoh's daughter. One day he witnesses a Hebrew man being beaten by an Egyptian. He clearly doesn't like seeing one of his own being attacked and so he kills the Egyptian. He then flees Egypt. Naturally he is not in a hurry to go back there. Hardly surprising really;

if you had upset someone because of something you had said or done, and you knew they weren't happy with you; would you want to meet up with that person? No, I'm sure not. But life is often full of tough choices and sometimes we have to bite the bullet and get on with it but it's not easy.

So then in the story we hear the Lord says to Moses that he will be with him. When Moses asks about what to say when asked, 'Who sent you,' the Lord says, 'I AM WHO I AM....I AM has sent me to you'.

This is not the only place we hear this title used in respect to the Lord. Indeed Jesus, in the New Testament, also used this in various 'I AM' readings, for example 'I am the Bread of Life' and 'I am the Good Shepherd'. However, here the Lord simply says, 'I AM WHO I AM'.

What are we to make of this and how does this help us pick up the courage to do something we are in trepidation about? I AM in Hebrew is Jehovah. Jehovah translates as 'the Lord'. The Lord is seen as the loving aspect of the Divine; God as wisdom or truth and therefore Lord God is the conjunction of Love and Truth. When we are facing difficulties, who do we want to come to our aid, but the loving aspect of the Lord. So here the Lord is simply telling Moses to state that he is speaking on behalf of Jehovah or the Lord. He, simply, is the Lord, the one true loving Lord who will be with him as he will also be with us through all the tough and difficult decisions we have to face.

So when we have that trying task to complete, that person we need to speak to but don't want to, the job to do that we would rather not do, then we need to remember this. We need to call on the Lord, our loving Saviour, who will be with us and will always care for us; if we find ourselves facing a challenge or difficulty let's turn to our loving Lord for his great Love which is available to all. Let's seek him in prayer and ask him to lead us through and forward on our journey to a more green and pleasant land.

Jehovah Lord, we ask you to be with us through all the difficult times, the times when we have challenges to face. Lord, you are with us always. You are our guide, and our loving Saviour. Amen.

So we heard in our Bible reading about Jonathan's friendship with David. Just what is it about friendship that brings out this desire to be loyal, to defend and to protect?

In the dictionary online it states that a friend has a bond of mutual affection, a person you know well who is not necessarily a member of your family. I think, sometimes, it is difficult to define it in just a few sentences. Friendships can run very deep but also just be fairly superficial (eg on social media).

Now I would like to ask you – what does friendship mean to you?

So there are many aspects to friendship and not always easy to put them into a few words.

Jonathan was the son of King Saul, and would, normally, have expected to succeed his father as King. However the Lord has chosen, and anointed, David to be the next King instead. One could imagine this might make Jonathan a bit upset and jealous of David, but there is no suggestion of this at all. He and David were great friends and his loyalty to David was so clear in this story.

Incidentally Jonathan would have been about 50 at this time whilst David was a mere youth, around 20 years of age. Clearly this did not affect their bond of friendship, which went beyond mere details.

David represents faith – a steady and sure certainty in doing right. Jonathan, early in the book of Samuel had fought a whole army single-handed showing real conviction and courage so they had both a strong connection understanding their faith in what was right and in their love for the Lord. They made a covenant with each other which bound them in their friendship and ultimately it was this that would guide Jonathan to choose to support David, even though it would mean going against his father.

Helping David to escape his father's anger was part of that loyalty to his friend. He remained loyal to David until his death.

If you are a true friend to someone you will love them even if they don't always do things the way you want, because being a loyal friend allows for times when you have differences.

This is how the Lord loves and we follow his example when we show love, loyalty and support to our friends and allow for times when, perhaps, they appear to be acting more selfishly; because they are your friends....true friends. This is how Jonathan felt about David and it was, clearly, a mutual feeling. David clearly loved Jonathan too. And, so, the Lord wants us to be the same, caring for and loving others and supporting them.

King Saul at this time had started to be affected by negative thoughts and was very much centred on self. He was, visibly, jealous of David and felt threatened by him. We can be like this too if we are focussed on our self-importance and act jealously toward others who appear to have what we want, which, in Saul's case, was attention. This is such an easy trap to fall in. We live in a world which is very much focussed on self – who is the most important, who is the richest, who has the most things etc.

But leading a life focussed on the Lord helps steer us away from these temptations and helps us to see that caring about others and being a true friend is so much more rewarding.

We heard in our Bible reading how Jonathan struggled to reconcile betraying his father to be loyal to David but in the end accepts he is doing the right thing to protect his friend. I am sure he will have felt much happier in the long run. The selfish route never brings true happiness.

Being a loyal and true friend to the Lord and to our friends brings so much more rewards.

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command.

John 15 v13-14

Dear Lord, you are our dearest friend and are always there for us. Help us to be a true friend and to be loyal and supportive to others in the way you are with us. Amen.

Daniel was a prophet and he is considered to have been brought up in a royal household but this isn't certain. The king at the time was King Jehoiachin and in 597BC the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and the Jews, including a young Daniel were exiled to Babylon. The king of Babylon at this time was King Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians worshipped other gods and each area had their own gods.

Daniel continued to live at the royal court and in the early parts of his book we hear that he interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. He and three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, were devout Jews. They refused to follow the worship of the land and kept fast to their God. Prior to our reading, you may recall that Daniel's friends had been put in a fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar for this reason and their God protected them from the flames. Nebuchadnezzar began to see the power of the God of Israel and things changed for a while. Sometime after this the kingdom was taken over by Darius, the Mede. Religious practices weren't much different and continued to be at odds with the Jews. All of this would not help any of the Jews maintain their faith, to keep their focus on their God. But Daniel held fast to God and refused to follow the gods of the land. He was given a chief position by King Darius. Unsurprisingly the other leaders were jealous of Daniel and did not like the fact that he wouldn't worship their gods. So we hear they plotted his downfall by getting King Darius to decree a law preventing anyone praying to anybody other than the king.

So, having looked at the background leading up to this moment, let's consider the character of Daniel. He was extremely focussed, upholding his faith in the Lord, despite being surrounded by others worshipping different gods. He adhered to the laws and put his total faith in God, never wavering. He showed courage and conviction, praying in front of an open window, knowing he would be seen and punished for doing so.

I wonder how we would react in similar circumstances. Would we be so bold?

Of course when we consider this on a deeper level this isn't about us putting our faith on show. It is more about standing up for our faith. It's about letting go of pride, represented by King Darius, wanting everyone to praise him, and recognising who has the real power, the Lord; about being able to openly acknowledge for ourselves. We are all subject to pride, the need to feel superior and important, and the desire for praise from others is a very natural human desire. We can easily fall prey to its power in our lives and forget who has the real power, the Lord. Openly praying in front of a window is about acknowledging before the Lord, His power, that He is the source of all we do and say.

So pride is a threat to our real self; the person who wants to love and follow God always and to consider others before themselves. Lions symbolise a sense of pride which can be both positive and negative. For example – a sense of pride in following the Lord is clearly a positive thing. This is what Daniel was showing when he openly prayed in front of the window. However they can also represent a false sense of pride, pride in self, because the flip side is that there is inherently the temptation to do wrong, in order to get what we want, even when we know it isn't the right thing to do. By doing this we deny the presence of the Lord because all our attention is on our sense of pride and doing what WE want to do. So we need to face our lions'. We need to openly acknowledge these before the Lord and he will close the 'mouths of the lions' so to speak so they can not harm us. King Darius' hands are tied by his own law but God's hands are never tied. So Daniel clearly shows us a good example of how we should lead our lives, openly acknowledging God within us, putting others before ourselves and being willing to openly accept our faults and to bring them before the Lord. This way we will be able to keep the lions at bay. The temptations will always be there and we need to be on our guard, to openly acknowledge them and to seek the Lord's help. We need to put our trust and faith in Him always.

Dear Lord, when we are tempted by pride and selfish ways, help us to put our trust and faith in you. Help us to steer away from pride to more selfless ways, caring for others and following your will. Amen.

September Home Worship by Revd Christine Bank

Sunday 3rd September 2023

Isaiah 6: 1-8a

This time last year we were in a period which turned out to be the last few days of the life of the late Queen Elizabeth II; her passing on 8th September 2022 marked both the end of her reign and the accession of King Charles III.

The dates of an individual monarch, or a period with successive generations occupying the throne or holding power can give a shape to human history and identify time periods across the world. Development of the knowledge of the world around us, the discoveries as science advanced or the far reaches of the world were explored, the style of architecture, of metalwork and pottery often have some reference to either the monarch or the most powerful dynasty of the day in the way they are identified.

The Old Testament has plenty of books which are historical in nature and there is a strong focus on the leader of the time as the life of the nation is laid out for us with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and later the journey moving from Egypt into the Promised Land with first Moses then Joshua leading before the time of Judges and onto the two books each of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles.

The Prophets are recorded speaking to the various leaders and the nations, giving the difficult message that they are straying from the Lord and need to mend their ways or give up the habits they have adopted from the native people around them.

Spending time in personal reflection often highlights some aspect of our own living which could be brought into better order, something we could change or at least be aware of not repeating in the future. Other times those moments between ourselves and the Lord can fill us with a sense of uplifting wonder – the words of Isaiah (Is 6:1)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple.

Reckoning this event by the death of King Uzziah reminds us that the meaning of death in the Bible is always looking to the heavenly understanding of something new coming into being - a process speaking of resurrection and new life rather than our human perspective of things finishing or of being lost to us.

Reading the verses which follow we see Isaiah find a new realisation of his own unclean state and how this leads on to the Lord being able to use him to speak to the people.

Prayer. Lord Jesus, as we reflect on our own situations and actions help us to turn to you and be ready to see whatever you need us to know or understand today. Your energy and strength enrich those inner aspects of our heart and mind which this world cannot reach, setting challenges and leading to outcomes we can never fully anticipate. May we be ready to be led into what is new and be content to recognise when it is right to leave behind the things which have fulfilled their use. Amen.

Sunday 10th September 2023

Jeremiah 18: 1-12

The Lord sent the prophet to learn through watching the potter. Seeing the clay moved and shaped by skilled hands, then reworked when it wasn't turning out as intended helped Jeremiah understand new insights about the sovereignty of the Lord and His ultimate authority over the people. If you have time to read on through succeeding chapters, you will see Jeremiah is faithful in his task of speaking to the people and that the chief priests react by having him beaten and put in the stocks. Then Jeremiah gives voice to his personal struggles as he suffers for the words he spoke but this is set against a more powerful inner need to give voice to the truth which he cannot suppress, he is unable to stay silent.

The relationship of the potter and clay as reflecting the Lord and the people is used in other Biblical passages, with this brief explanation from Arcana Caelestia.

AC1300. 'Clay' means the good from which the mind or the member of the Church is formed. This too is clear from the Word, as in Isaiah, *But now, O Jehovah, You are our Father, we are the clay, and You are our potter; and we are all the work of Your hands.*

Is 64:8-9

'Clay' stands for the member himself of the Church who is being formed, and so stands for good stemming from charity by means of which the formation, that is, the reformation and regeneration, of every man is achieved In Jeremiah 18.6

Like the clay in the hand of the potter so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.

Here too 'clay' has a similar meaning. Whether reference is made to building with clay or to forming from it, it amounts to the same.

Such an ordinary thing, an item being made from clay, can be so powerful in leading our thoughts towards the way each one of us needs to be reformed and reshaped at every level. The sense of our life being guided by the Lord, of it not being a random or chance happening but having a deeper purpose for us and our individual qualities can challenge our ideas of how we spend our time and our energy. "Doing good stemming from charity" can sound awkward, but it is an expression of the way the Lord reforms us as we are moved towards receiving His inspiring love. It becomes a part of our thinking as His heavenly love rather than our selfish motivations begins to take a more powerful role in shaping both our thoughts and our actions. Ultimately this changes us, and we find our life formed and built into the unique shape and pattern of the Lord's design.

Prayer

Open our minds so the small things of ordinary daily life can be rich with your presence, enriched as we see something deeper or more powerful than the obvious and external process. You give us the incomparable gift of a mind which can think creatively, find new ways of looking at familiar situations and continually develop and understand so much more than we already know. May we be willing to give this gift back to You, to be guided and directed through your Word and to make every effort to live the life of useful service which prepares us for a heavenly life to come. Amen.

Sunday 17th September 2023

Divine Providence 151.1

Unless we do what we intend, there is a lack of real intention inside that eventually becomes unwillingness.

Matthew 22: 34-40 The Greatest Commandment

When we see what is good do we automatically think we should work towards holding that in a loving mindset? Just because something is recognised as 'good' doesn't mean we like it or want to do it. Sometimes what we know to be the right course of action is a disruptive thing which will challenge us deeply and make our life much harder. It's an awful lot easier to swerve round and look from a different perspective which allows us to minimise disruption or completely ignore what we 'think' we saw or understood by providing ourselves with an alternative viewpoint.

Our best intentions to 'be good' will be challenged in various ways as we go through life and although on our best days we can recognise our life holds within it the potential for us to be angelic there are plenty of times the opposite is true. So what are we meant to do?

Jesus drew on the words from Deuteronomy 6:5 when he said "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

It is so easy to think of 'love' as an emotion which is uplifting and life enhancing but the hard fact of any long-term relationship is that your beloved spouse, partner, child or friend will periodically bring a real challenge to the relationship. You may also be the cause of some stress or difficulty in the relationship! The limits of patience, tolerance and good manners can be sorely tested by those closest to us. The fact we know we love these people, and our life would be so much poorer without their presence, doesn't mean we always actually like them or how they behave every minute of each day. Time and space and a period to cool down, allow heated feelings and possibly unwise words to subside and be handled better in a calm setting work wonders and allow the tricky patches to be part and parcel of fundamentally loving and caring relationships.

The discipline of 'love' when the really testing times come along is what marks out so much of the deepest quality of our relationships. The words from DP151.1 remind us that there's a real need to keep working at our significant priorities; if they cease to be priorities then they lapse and ultimately are likely to be so reluctantly acknowledged that they cease to be valued.

It's relatively straightforward to think of the relationship priorities of our family and friends; giving appropriate weight to the connection we have with the Lord, making sure our efforts to truly love Him as the Bible spells it out are always held as central to the way we live isn't as easy.

Prayer. Loving is harder work than we realise; the 'honeymoon period' doesn't last and the hard work of real life gets in the way of our best intentions. Help us to accept the work of 'love' as a true priority in our daily life, to be willing to do what is necessary to establish heavenly joy and peace in our hearts. Amen.

Sunday 24th September 2023

Exodus 23: 14-19

Looking at the book of Exodus we can see the Lord is shaping a new way of life for the people. We know they have years of wanderings to get through as they have to make the switch from seeing themselves as slaves to the Egyptians and being bound by those limitations and discover instead what it means to be led day by day under the Lord's providence.

That idea of a journey from one state to another is also expressed by the spiritual changes that are required in our life as we begin with a need for acknowledgement and repentance, moving on to the first steps of change and new beginnings which lead towards our gradual reformation. That reformed life with new priorities and ways of thinking takes time to grow and establish.

Think of the amount of time between sowing a seed or planting a tiny seedling and being able to see a fully mature plant. Even if it is a really fast-growing seed such as cress, which tends to be used with children to show quick results, there is a natural time taken for the growth to happen. And no disrespect to the humble cress plant, but there are other, more complicated, larger plants around us which can be more useful, take much longer to grow and enrich the world in different ways.

So, with that in mind, reading these verses perhaps it is possible to see that the Lord's command to celebrate three festivals can connect us to the process we need to follow for spiritual progress to take root and grow in our own life.

Beginning with the simple things; unleavened bread and recognising the Lord is with us. The time for this is linked to that departure from Egypt, the Passover which was and remains such an important occasion to Jews. This links to the repentance aspect, a beginning, but so very important as it is a time of humility and recognition of the Lord taking the lead in our life as we start to follow Him more closely.

From there we have two harvests, one is to give thanks for the very first things and the other for the complete gathering of all the crops from the fields. Thinking about the way we can see the lives of those around us, and that it is relatively easy to look at others, consider someone you can bring to mind who has lived in particular ways for a number of years. See what you think of how their life has certain habits and patterns built in and ingrained. Looking at someone else it may be possible to see what enriches their character, makes them lovely to be with and a privilege to know. Maybe such thought can also highlight less comfortable traits we notice and observe too. Other people are a great help to us in our own journey of repentance, reformation and regeneration. Our interactions reveal lots about them which we naturally use as we form our own opinions and decide how close we wish to get.

The actual task is deeper than looking at others, we are asked to look at our own life and the way our own journey of spiritual progress takes shape. We really need to take a serious interest in the quality of the 'harvest' our own life yields.

Prayer. Lord of all that lives, may our life be offered in your service each day. Amen.