



“where the river flows everything will live”

Hope for Today

Bible Sunday

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On this Bible Sunday, we live together in the flow of your love, oh God our Father.

Teach us today, Oh Christ our Brother.

Rekindle our passion for your ways, Oh Holy Spirit our very life and breath. Amen.

If I asked you how you were doing, I wonder how positive your answers would be. But I'd like you to think about it. How are you, at the moment, really? Think about it.

If we were being totally honest, I'm fairly certain most of us wouldn't just give a glib, 'Fine, thanks!' These are challenging times in many, many ways. Can we still experience hope and joy?

At the moment, the world is living under Covid, but our experiences are varied. I don't live in Wales, or in a high rise flat, or a refugee slum. I am not worried about my job. So my Covid time has not been too stressful. But I can't visit my son in Scotland. That's hard. I listen to the news, the numbers, the pandemic forecasts and am ...appalled. Where is hope? How can anyone be positive and up-beat these days?

Let's see what our readings this morning have to teach us.

Ezra's listeners wept as they listened to the Law of Moses being read. Why?

Well, perhaps because their journey to this day had involved suffering in exile, returning to the ruins of Jerusalem and fighting constant opposition as they rebuilt. It had been tough. Their reaction to hearing those familiar commandments, clearly explained so that they could understand, hit them with such force that they wept.

They were rediscovering the identity they had lost in exile. They knew again whose they were and whom they served: that they were God's chosen people.

But lament was not to be the hallmark of the day. No...instead they were to rejoice and celebrate, for they were told: 'the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

Joy. How we need joy, just now. How we need the strength of the Lord to see us through. How we need to rejoice in our identity as the followers of Jesus in this 21st Century, Coronavirus world. How we need to share our joy around.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is describing the 'end of the age' for his disciples. It's strange, this passage. How does *it* make you feel? Disturbed, afraid, worried? Or filled with excitement and longing for Jesus coming back?

For instance, the angelic trumpets might be taken as a warning that judgement is on its way. But we might also hear them as the trumpets of celebration and joy. There's power and glory, too. There's a gathering

together of all God's scattered beloved children. There's reassurance: heaven and earth might pass away, but Jesus words, Jesus promises? Never! Depend on it!

Part 2

So, is there really hope for today? Good news for a Covid-ridden world?

As we've heard, Jesus said: *My words will never pass away.* Let's remember, too, the words from the beginning of the gospel of John:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Jesus is the Life that brings light and hope to all people. Light that shines in darkness, Light that will never be overwhelmed or overcome. Hope that is present with us, in us and can come be passed on to other by us.

We too can bring light into the dark places of sorrow and anxiety, of hunger and fear and hardship, because we are sharing the love of Christ Jesus as we live out our faith.

St Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: *The word is near you: in your mouth and on your heart.*

That Word is Jesus, our Lord. Near us. Close as a heart-beat. What is he saying to us today, individually and as his Church? Perhaps he's saying: *You can know hope, my friends, even today, because of me. And because you are my friends, you can be hope-bringers to others, too. Listen to me! Learn from me. Do what I have shown you. Love as I have loved you.*

Sometimes we have to listen very hard to hear him speak to us and often we struggle to read the Bible and really engage with what we find there. We sometimes struggle to understand. But it's worth the battle.

We need to stop, listen, read, try to understand and learn, pray and act as Christ's people ... be his little lights in this world's gathering darkness. We must rejoice in our identity as his sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, as his beloved ones. That's where our hope will be refreshed and renewed, as we rediscover the joy of being close to Jesus, doing the same things he did...loving others.

The Bible is a tool that will help us: it is full of good things, challenging things, downright outrageous things. Last week, David encouraged us 'love God and do the little things'.

As we try to live through these times and retain our hope, our health, our sanity and our faith, we'll find that we can bring light into darkness easily by being a friend, a good neighbour, a listening ear on the end of the telephone, a writer of cards, a shopper '*extra-ordinaire*'.

We can push back the darkness as we do simple things. We may well also be serving God by straining every sinew, engaging all our energies to teach the young, to treat the sick, to do our jobs and provide for our families .

Read the gospels and we'll find that they brim over with the outrageous love of Jesus and his challenge: 'Whatever you do, do it as if you are doing it me.' The Church of God needs to be a light in dark times, sharing the profligate, scandalous, never failing love of God to all, without discrimination.

But, I think it's really important to admit that sometimes we just feel exhausted with it all. Sometimes we come to the end of ourselves, to the end of all our own resources and resilience.

It's all right to just stop and rest in God's love. Ezra's priests knew that: they told the people to 'Be still...be still, rejoice and be glad...the joy of the Lord is your strength.

God is holding on to us tighter and more assuredly than we can ever hold on to our faith in him. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. Heaven and earth may pass away, but the words of Jesus, the love of God, will never come to an end.

There will be light in the darkness, because Jesus is that light. Because even the tomb could not hold him. Even death could not conquer him. He is our risen Saviour. In him we have hope. In him we can put our trust.

And as we look for him coming back in power, we can catch a glimpse of him **today** as we live out his love to our friends and families, to neighbours and colleagues, to strangers and refugees. We can have hope for today, because Jesus is our hope.

Let us pray (in the words of Andrew Peterson's song)

Do you feel the world is broken? (We do)
Do you feel the shadows deepen? (We do)
But do you know that all the dark
won't stop the light from getting through? (We do)
Do you wish that you could see it all made new? (We do)

Is all creation groaning? (It is)
Is a new creation coming? (It is)
Is the glory of the Lord to be the light within our midst?
(It is)
Is it good that we remind ourselves of this? (It is)

Does the Father truly love us? (He does)
Does the Spirit move among us? (He does)
And does Jesus, our Messiah, hold forever those He loves? (He does)
Does our God intend to dwell again with us? (He does)
Amen.

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