

Christ Church, 19 Nov. 2023

Call to Worship (1 Thess. 5:1-11)

We come before God not fearfully but adoringly,
we worship not as a duty but with delight.
God has not marked us for punishment
but for salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Lift up your eyes beyond anxieties and worries
to God whose glory exceeds the starry skies,
building each other up in faith and joy.

Hymn The Day of the Lord R&S 637

The Day of the Lord shall come, as prophets have told,
when Christ shall make all things new, no matter how old.
And some at the stars may gaze, and some at God's word,
in vain to predict the time, the Day of the Lord.

*The desert shall spring to life, the hills shall rejoice;
the lame of the earth shall leap, the dumb shall find voice;
the lamb and the lion shall lie, and the last shall be first;
and nations for war no more shall study or thirst.*

The Day of the Lord shall come – a thief in the night,
a curse to those in the wrong who think themselves right,
a pleasure for those in pain or with death at the door;
a true liberation for prisoners and poor.

The Day of the Lord shall come and judgement be known,
as nations like sheep and goats come close to the throne.
Then Christ shall himself reveal, asking all to draw near
and see in his face all faces once ignored here.

The Day of the Lord shall come, but now is the time
to subvert earth's wisdom with Christ's folly sublime,
by loving the loveless, turning the tide and the cheek,
by walking beneath the cross in step with the weak.

John Bell & Graham Maule

Introduction/Children's Time – grim Grimm's Fairy Tales

Offering

Generous God, you are the source of every good gift,
Of life, light and love; of peace, protection and presence,
Of time, treasure and talents; of faith, fellowship and fruitfulness.
Receive these gifts in gratitude for your generosity,
Enliven us with your love and equip us for your service.
Holy God, multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

Hymn God who spoke in the beginning (Tune *Hark the herald angels* – R&S 159)

God, who spoke in the beginning,
by your word all life began!
Still, your words in Law and story,
shape our purpose, show your plan.
Ancient words we all inherit,
words of wisdom, help and merit,
teach us how we ought to be:
humble, gracious, endlessly.
By your written words draw near, let your love sustain us here.

God, who sent us fiery prophets,
fearless, faithful, all for you,
still, their strident call for justice
speaks to challenge all we do.
Living, present, urgent voices
put before us vital choices:
will we work for God today,
will we follow in your way?
Through such prophets, still draw near;
let your love sustain us here.

God who came to us in person,
walking with us here on earth,
still, the way you took in Jesus
shows your wisdom and your worth!
Selfless, sharing, kind and caring,
learning humbly, yet so daring;
for our rescue flailed alive,
spat upon, then crucified.
Living Jesus now draw near,
let your love sustain us here.

John Campbell © 2016 Kevin Mayhew

Children leave for Sunday Club

Opening Prayer

We give you all thanks and praise, O God, for you have destined us for salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. You created the earth and entrusted it into our hands. Forgive our poor care of your Creation. Forgive us when we turn a blind eye to the suffering around us. Forgive us when we stay silent when we should speak up for the vulnerable and marginalised. You have spoken to us through your Son, Jesus, teaching us to look to you and trust in your kindness, and to be faithful stewards of your gifts. He was scorned and mocked and died for us, but was raised by you. You have promised a day of judgment and deliverance, when Christ will come as unexpectedly as a thief in the night, to reveal the children of light and gather all who have been trustworthy with what you have given into Your kingdom of joy and grace. Therefore, with our hearts lifted high, we offer you thanks and praise at all times through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Hymn O God our help in ages past R&S 705 omit v5

O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast,
and our eternal home.

Under the shadow of Thy throne
thy saints have dwelt secure;
sufficient is Thine arm alone,
and our defence is sure.

Before the hills in order stood,
or earth received her frame,

from everlasting Thou art God,
to endless years the same.

A thousand ages in Thy sight
are like an evening gone;
short as the watch that ends the night
before the rising sun.

O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
be Thou our guard while life shall last,
and our eternal home.

Isaac Watts

Readings: Zephaniah 1:1-7, 12-18
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Today I feel like we're a bit in no-man's land – the week before last we had a baptism, last week was Remembrance Sunday, next Sunday is Christ the King Sunday and then we are into Advent. So where does that leave us today? In the kind of meh, before Christmas. What my dad used to call the dark days before Christmas – often windy and wet and getting dark about 4pm. And today's lectionary readings aren't very cheerful either!

First, we hear from the prophet Zephaniah, one of the minor prophets. His writings are described as a typical prophetic book, which means there is quite a lot of hyperbole – dramatic language and imagery to get the point across. Zephaniah lived during the reign of the Judean king Josiah who was known as a great religious reformer. He defied the Assyrian Empire and established a certain degree of political independence by removing foreign images from the Temple in Jerusalem. At the time there were close ties between worship and politics and so removing Assyrian gods from the Temple was an act of resistance. The book of this prophet, which is only three chapters long (4 pages) opens with a dramatic announcement of the Day of the Lord, describing in exaggerated terms how God will act to re-establish justice. Zephaniah blames the Judeans for mixing worship of the one true God with worshipping foreign gods. The people have strayed from the path of God and will pay the price. The prophet does not mince his words – God will utterly sweep everything from the face of the earth – humans and animals, echoing the language of the story of the flood, then God focuses specifically on the Judeans, those who have worshipped the Canaanite God Baal and the Ammonite god Milcom, before returning to address all inhabitants of the earth. The language is so extreme that in verse 15 he uses the term *Shoah* for ruin, the Hebrew word, which later has been used to describe the Holocaust, so awful was its devastation.

The Day of the Lord is rarely, if ever, without language of battle and war. Military imagery would have been familiar and unsurprising to the people of Jerusalem. War was such a real threat for the small nation of Judah that it served as a ready metaphor and experience. (some things never change). Furthermore, the idea that sin disappears gently or easily is thoroughly unbiblical. Rooting out sin and evil is a messy and often violent business, especially for the prophets of the Old Testament. Yet none of this imagery is literal, it is a bit like Grimm's fairy tales – a scary story with a moral, aimed at making the people repent and do the will of God.

The idolatry of which the inhabitants of Judah are guilty affects the world beyond their borders. This is not a case of individual retribution, where faithful worshipers of God sit in safety while those guilty of idolatry face the consequence. Created beings turning against God the creator has a broader impact. In our more individualized culture in the 21st century, where worship and faith are usually understood as a personal choice, the idea that our worship is part of the workings of the world sounds odd. Think of it more as knowing one's place within the world and trusting God to fulfil God's role within that same world, rather than about specific religious actions. We should love, and trust God above all things. Anything else is idolatry. For Zephaniah, to do anything else risks divine anger, not as an

individual punishment but as a result of being out of place. Removing God from God's rightful place and placing trust in other gods, whatever, or whoever they might be, sets more than one's own relationship with God askew. It spins out to affect one's neighbours and even the very workings of creation.

It is worth considering the interconnectedness of our planet and the ways in which the things we do and the things we leave undone, as well as in what we place our trust, affect the whole not just ourselves. As I write this on the day of a big government re-shuffle, it is worth remembering that who we support and who and what we vote for, affects the whole country much more than it affects each individual. If you believe in something, you need to speak up for it, not simply assume others will. Or to invoke another Biblical image – swords need to be beaten into ploughshares – peace won't just magically happen; we have to work hard to achieve it.

But today's lectionary is not completely doom and gloom. Our reading of Zephaniah ends with a full and terrible end for all the inhabitants of earth, but the book of the prophet as a whole moves toward joy and salvation. And then we move to the New Testament, with Paul saying in his letter to the Thessalonians – “God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ... therefore encourage one another and build up each other.”

Chapter 5 of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians also talks about the coming 'day of the Lord' just as Zephaniah did. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, but to avoid repetition, I'll just say Paul, are negotiating a cultural difference between themselves and the Thessalonians. In chapter four, the issue was the nature of death – whether those who died before Christ came again would be together with God, with those who were still living – the early Christians were expecting the second coming at any moment, so it was important to them to know what would happen to their loved ones who had died. In chapter five, Paul is addressing the Greek propensity for seeing certain times and seasons as auspicious. At issue is the nature of time itself.

For many Greeks, time had two particular properties. On the one hand, it was eternal; just like death, time went on forever. On the other hand, it was cyclical. The cyclical nature of time operated on different scales, ranging from the annual repetition of festivals all the way to repetition on the historical scale. Paul proposes a new way to think about time. Rather than the cyclical repetition, he urges the Thessalonians to consider time in a linear fashion – that time is hurtling towards one event only: the day when Jesus will come again in glory, the “Day of the Lord”. It is interesting that while we think of time in a linear way, human

history tends to repeat itself as we see with yet another war in the Middle East, and in the church we have an annual cycle of festivals to remember the life of Jesus, which will start all over again with Advent.

The Day of the Lord comes with a catch. Even though its arrival is inevitable, it comes at an unknown hour. To make this point, Paul uses a saying from the Gospels that compares the day to the arrival of a thief in the night. The sense of surprising imagery continues as he switches metaphors from the arrival of a thief to the arrival of labour pains. Those expecting a baby know that at any moment, their life will be changed forever, but they cannot predict exactly when it will happen. With this down to earth image, Paul captures the paradox of inevitability and uncertainty that mark the coming of the Day of the Lord. He then moves to imagery of light and darkness. In the ancient world, night was categorically different to how modern westerners see it, because it was truly dark. We have polluted the darkness with our electric lights and so can no longer understand the sharpness of the distinction between the day and the night and the fear that total darkness brings. Understanding the fear of darkness in Paul's context helps to illuminate the courage required to stay awake and keep watch during the night. When he urges the Thessalonians to stay awake and watch for their master's return, he is calling upon them to show remarkable faith and courage. These metaphors and images, remind us that Paul's letters were sent to address real communities in difficult moments of faith.

In the face of doubts about one's standing before God, we are to cling to the assurance that God has not destined us for wrath and destruction, as portrayed by the prophet Zephaniah, but for salvation through Jesus Christ. And this, I think, sets us on the path to Advent and Christmas. God so loved us, that despite our faults, our lack of justice, our love of violence and selfishness, God loved us so much that God chose to come and live among us as a mortal; to suffer alongside us, as one of us; to experience the joy and pain of being human. Now, that really is a lifestyle choice!

Hymn Dear Lord, to you again R&S 436

Dear Lord, to you again our gifts we bring,
this bread our toil, this wine our ecstasy,
poor and imperfect though they both must be;
yet you will take a heart-free offering.
Yours is the bounty, ours the unfettered will
to make or mar, to fashion good or ill.

Yes, you will take and bless, and grace impart
to make again what once your goodness gave,
what we half crave, and half refuse to have,
a sturdier will, a more repentant heart.

Christ Church, 5 Sept. 2021 Written service circulated to both churches

You have on earth no hands, no hearts but ours;
bless them as yours, ourselves, our will, our powers.

Break bread, O Lord, break down our wayward wills,
break down our prized possessions, break them down;
let them be freely given as your own
to all who need our gifts, to heal their ills.
Break this, the bread we bring, that all may share
in your one living body, everywhere.

Our lips receive your wine, our hands your bread;
you give us back the selves we offered you,
won by the Cross, by Calvary made new,
a heart enriched, a life raised from the dead.
Grant us to take and guard your treasure well,
that we in you, and you in us may dwell.

H.C.A. Gaunt

Lord's Supper

We remember, as we do at every communion service, the gift of the life and death of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Come to this table, you who are beloved in Christ. Come, not because you must, but because you may.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Loving God, the world you made is beautiful and full of wonder.
You made us, with all your creatures, and you love all that you have made.
You gave us the words of your prophets, the stories of your people throughout the generations,
and the gathered wisdom of many years.
You gave us Jesus, your Son, to be born and to grow up
in difficult times where there was little peace.
He embraced people with your love and told stories to change us all.
He healed those in pain and brought to life those who had lost hope.
He made friends with anyone who would listen and loved even his enemies.
For these things, he suffered. For these things, he died.
And he was raised from death and lives with you forever.
You give us your Holy Spirit, to teach and to strengthen us,
to remind us of Jesus Christ and to make us one in him.
For all these gifts we thank you, and join with all your people
on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:

Holy, holy, holy Lord

**God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.**

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

Christ Church, 5 Sept. 2021 Written service circulated to both churches

Lord God, send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine,
and upon your people, that Christ may be with us,
and we may be ready to live for you
and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this is remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Lord Jesus Christ, as we have proclaimed your death
by eating this bread and drinking this cup, help us to wait for you,
to wish for you, and to watch for you,
so that when you come again you will find us ready.
For you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Prayers of Intercession

Our gracious eternal God, the ancient words of Paul echo for us this day.
We are so much like the people of the Thessalonian Church and its culture.
We want to have glimpses of the future so that we might know that we are secure.
We want to have the security to know that tomorrow will be alright.
We want to have life all buttoned down and figured out so there will be no surprises.
We want you to rid us of all anxiety and worry and fear.
We want to know that when the great call comes for us we will be safe.
We want all darkness and all uncertainty removed from our lives.
Become alive for us again in these quiet moments. We pray that here and now you would again
open to us your powerful and grace-filled presence.
Lead our spirits to find the courage to say, "All will be well because we are yours."
Lead our spirits to find the ability to live one moment and one day at a time.
Lead our spirits to serenity and a peace which the world cannot give.
Lead our spirits to know that with your power we can cope with whatever surprises life presents to us.
Lead our spirits to know that we are destined "not for wrath" but for your redeeming.
And lead our spirits to know that "whether we wake or sleep," living or dying, we are yours into the ages of all ages.

Merciful God, as we continue to hear about the atrocities happening in Gaza, we pray for the people of Israel and Gaza, for the people living through war in Ukraine, and for all those living in areas of conflict around the world. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We pray for all those living in poverty and the many organisations and individuals who work hard to make poverty a thing of the past. As you have been generous to us, help us to try our good fortune, so that all may have enough for their needs. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**
We pray today for all those who go hungry and for the people who help them, through volunteering at foodbanks, by donating food and money, or by speaking out and raising awareness of issues. As we start to look towards Christmas and we are bombarded with adverts for fancy food and luxury gifts, help us to remember those who cannot afford to give their children presents; for those who will have no food, for those living on the streets and those for whom the holidays are emotionally or mentally challenging. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

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We pray with all those living with any kind of disability or impairment. Make us mindful that often the difficulties of being disabled are caused by prejudice and misunderstanding of the able-bodied. Help us to be more caring and understanding. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We pray for all those with mental health issues and those who care for them. And we pray for those living with learning difficulties or autism, that they may find understanding and support. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We pray for unity and equality and an end to discrimination and prejudice of all kind. We pray for those who have experienced discrimination because of their disability, mental health, or stigma because they live with dementia; for those who experience prejudice because of their sexuality or the colour of their skin, or because they are poor, or uneducated. Help us to truly remember that in Christ we are all one, created in God's image. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for all those around the world affected by climate change in recent heatwaves, floods, storms and earthquakes. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for all those who are ill and those who care for them; for those in hospital, those awaiting test results or treatment, for the dying and those who mourn.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy God, we gather all our prayers together in the prayer your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ taught us, saying:

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Let us talents and tongues employ R&S 453

Let us talents and tongues employ,
reaching out with a shout of joy:
bread is broken, the wine is poured,
Christ is spoken and seen and heard.

Christ is able to make us one,
at the table he set the tone,
teaching people to live to bless,
love in word and in deed express.

*Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again,
pass the Word around: loaves abound!*

Jesus calls us in, sends us out
bearing fruit in a world of doubt,
gives us love to tell, bread to share:
God (Immanuel) everywhere!

Fred Kaan

Blessing

God's blessing be upon us as we leave and return changed to our homes.

May we strengthen and encourage one another in our shared vision.

And may the blessing of our adventurous Creator God go with us.

And may the blessing of the Son, who showed us how to live, re-shape us.

And may the blessing of the dancing Spirit joyfully enable us in our renewed living. Amen.

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