

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 14th JUNE 2020

INTRODUCTION

In our Gospel today, Jesus tells his followers to “ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” – and then promptly sends them! Jesus’ mission is as daunting for us as it was for those first disciples. But Jesus’ own motivation, in which he invites us to share, begins and ends in compassion: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them.”

Our lives as Christians are all about a response to God’s love for us – a love which is not sentimental, but strong and eternal. “We love, because He first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

So take a moment now to remember God’s compassionate love for you and for all His children near and far, rich and poor, of whatever race or nationality. And give thanks that nothing can separate you from that love – ever!

OPENING BIBLE VERSE AND PRAYERS

“Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

The peace of the Lord be always with you!

The Lord is here.

He is with us.

Near or far.

He is with us.

The Lord is here

We are His people.

The Lord is here.

He gives us strength for the journey.

The Lord our God is here.

And we welcome Him now.

TURNING AGAIN TO GOD

Lord,

You have given us so much love,

but we have not always accepted it.

You have shown us how to love,

but we have not always learned it.

You have told us whom to love,

but we have not always done it.

You have told us the cost of love,

but we have not always been willing to pay it.

We are sorry for not understanding your love.

We are sorry for not sharing your love.

We are grateful for the love you offer, even now.

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Hear again the promise of Scripture: **“Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

NEW TESTAMENT READING (Romans 5:1-5)

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING (Matthew 9:35-10:8)

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When

he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness....

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.”

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION (by Tobias Thornes)

What does it mean to be a Christian? What’s it really about? And what makes Christianity any different from all those other religions out there to choose between?

The shutdown has shown us – if we were in any doubt – what Christianity is not about. It’s not primarily about church

buildings, as much as we may love them, or even about gathering together at all. It's not about rituals, it's not about traditions and it's not about liturgy – though we often find these things helpful. Indeed, Christianity is not about any of the things that seem on the surface to characterise how we practice it in Church.

True Christianity is not, and never has been, about religiously sticking to rules and conventions, or even about holding to one particular worldview, no matter how much certain historical authorities might lead you to think otherwise. Indeed, what marks Christianity out from all the other religions – even those that believe in and worship the same God as we do, such as Jews and Muslims – is that Christianity isn't a religion at all.

What is it then? Today's Gospel passage gives us the answer: Christianity is, above all things, a following. Following Christ. It's more of a sending out than a huddling together, a mission to embrace the world rather than keeping the truth hidden behind church doors and elaborate rituals. It's Good News for everyone, not just for a lucky few.

We are told by Matthew that Jesus taught, preached and healed all sorts of sicknesses suffered by the people around him, whom he felt sorry for because they were 'like sheep without a shepherd'. They were directionless, with no

understanding of how to make their lives meaningful, how to make things better, in the midst of many pains, sicknesses and sorrows at a time when Judah was under the Roman yoke. He was there to shepherd them – and so were his disciples. That's why Jesus sent out his closest followers to do the same things on his behalf, at first just to the Jews, God's original chosen people.

The equivalent passage to this in the Gospel of Luke has Jesus sending out these specific disciples for a specific period of time, after which they all gather together again, as if his instructions referred to a one-off event. But Matthew, by contrast, follows up the 'sending out' passage with a lengthy description of all the sorts of dangers, difficulties and persecutions that disciples are likely to face in Jesus' name. They will be thrown out of synagogues, brought before rulers, imprisoned, killed – all things that would happen to Christians in the coming centuries. In spite of all this, disciples are to 'take up the cross,' Jesus says, 'and follow me' even if that means falling out with authorities, friends and even close family members.

Matthew's commissioning of the disciples, hence, clearly isn't just about those particular disciples there and then; it's about anyone who would follow Christ – be a Christian, in the truest sense – including you and I. They don't need to worry about money, baggage, spare clothing on this journey – God will

give them what they need. They are to be the labourers working to bring in his harvest, the shepherds sent to guide the sheep. That's what Christians are: living and working amidst all people – Jew and Gentile, Christian and non-Christian – to share God's healing love in the world, carrying on and expanding Jesus' work through His spirit.

Following Christ isn't always easy. It means sometimes falling out with the customs of society, refusing to simply go along with how things are when we know that they are wrong, insisting on standing up for what is right even if we sacrifice our own safety, popularity or nowadays – for the sake of our people or planet – some of the luxuries we have become used to. But the rewards are much more than the costs. Christianity does give our lives meaning, and it does mean that when troubles come we can have hope. Hope that things will be better. Hope that troubles will pass. Hope that God will renew the face of the Earth he has made and humans have marred. Hope that, when we follow Him, he will renew us too, and help us to share in this great task.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION....

O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
consider all the works thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed;

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,
how great thou art, how great thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,
how great thou art, how great thou art!*

And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,
sent him to die – I scarce can take it in
that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
he bled and died to take away my sin:
Then sings my soul...

PRAYERS

Let us join in praying together with all God's people
To the Lord of the harvest.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of life,
And above all for your love in dying for us
Even before we knew or cared about you.
Break down any barriers which prevent us from being at peace
with you,
And fill your whole Church with love
For all who do not yet know your peace.

Silence

You, O Lord:

You are our hope and joy.

Father, we thank you for the diversity and richness of our world,
For the natural goodness of many,
And the innocence of the very young.
We pray for all victims of our world's mistakes and evils,
And ask your guidance and courage for our leaders and advisers.

Silence

You, O Lord:

You are our hope and joy.

Father, we thank you for the joy of our families and friendships,
And the opportunities provided in our homes for learning what real loving is all about.
We ask you to bring healing to broken relationships.
And we pray for those we love and worry about,
And those who love and worry about us,
Commending one another to your keeping.

Silence

You, O Lord:

You are our hope and joy.

Father, we thank you for all the medical research

That has brought healing to so many in this pandemic.
We pray for all who work in our hospitals, hospices and clinics,
And for all patients in their care.

We pray for all who are harassed and worried,
For those who have not been able to receive treatment,
And for those who long for the peace of mind that eludes them.

We take a few moments to remember before God those who are struggling with illness – those we know, and those we don't.

Silence

You, O Lord:

You are our hope and joy.

Father, we thank you for all who have lived your praise
And worked for the coming of your kingdom.
Receive into the joy of heaven
All who have died.
Among those who have died recently, we remember Sheila Ross.
And among those whose anniversaries fall at this time we remember May Brown, Iain McBain, Ugo Frascina, Geoff Clarke, Mick Tudge, and David Drew.

Silence

You, O Lord:

You are our hope and joy.

Father, we thank you for all who sense your calling
And respond to it with joy.

We pray for still more workers in your harvest,
To gather in many to share the joy of your peace.

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers

For the sake of your Son,

Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer (this version, or the traditional one)

Rejoicing in God's new creation, as our Saviour taught us, so
we pray:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,

and the glory are yours

now and for ever. Amen.

CLOSING BLESSING

**May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,
wherever He may send you.**

**May He guide you through the wilderness,
protect you through the storm.**

**May He bring you home rejoicing
at the wonders He has shown you.**

**May He bring you home rejoicing
once again into our doors.**

ENDING

**Loving God, bring us all to life
by the power of your love.**

**Bring us all to live
in the life of your kingdom.**

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The love of God,

And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,

Be with us all evermore.

Amen.