

ST. MARY OF NAZARETH /ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI – WEST WICKHAM

25th October 2020: Bible Sunday

Hazel writes:

I don't know about you, but finding a moment of quiet is currently proving to be very difficult for me. If you'd like to have some scheduled time out with a particular focus to gather round God's word, there will be an opportunity to do so once a month at a new series of **on-line retreats**: 1½ hours on a Sunday evening. There will be some music, prayer, a bible reading and reflection, with time to then go and do your own thing before coming back together to share if you'd like to do so. The first of these will be on Sunday 8th November from 6.30-8pm. An invitation with the Zoom meeting details will follow next week.

On Wednesday 28th October, **Midweek Communion** will be at St. Francis' at 10.45am. Next Sunday, 1st November there will be services of **Holy Communion** in St. Mary's at 8am and at 10am in St. Francis'. There will also be a service available **on-line** from 9am. Our **midweek communion** services will now only take place on a Wednesday at 10.45am in St Francis' Church in the weeks following a 10am Sunday service at St Mary's Church. This will be reviewed again in January.

We have received a certificate from Bromley Borough Foodbank to say that our **harvest donations** weighed in at a whopping 300kg! Thank you to everyone who donated them. Please do keep these donations coming to either the vicarage or the box outside the main door at St Francis' Church.

Currently the **Bromley Food Bank** need cold meat, custard, small bottles of squash, jelly, instant whip, long life fruit juice, sponge puddings, sweets, washing detergent (non-bio), shaving gel & razors, children's toothpaste & toothbrushes and Christmas food dated 2021 onwards. Currently there are large stocks of pasta, beans, soup, UHT milk, rice, cereals, tea, toilet rolls and tomatoes and these items are politely discouraged at the present time. Thank you for your continuing support.

Each week our "**coffee/tea & chat**" on Thursday at 2.30pm is an opportunity to share with others. It is just 40 minutes and you don't need to commit to joining each week. Please let Rowena (rowena.griff19@btinternet.com /020 8777 6112) know if you would like the log-in details.

Resources and updates for the week ahead – All files have been combined into a pew sheet, which has been sent on paper to those who are not on-line. Other worship and resources that you might want to listen to or look at on Sunday:

- The Church of England's national virtual service will be available on their website at www.churchofengland.org.
- The BBC have the following programmes to watch and listen to:
 - Sunday Worship at 8.10am on Radio 4 live from St. Martin in the Fields.
 - Choral Evensong at 3pm on Radio 3 from Croydon Minster.
 - On BBC 1: Sunday Morning Live at 10.30a.m. and Songs of Praise at 1.15p.m. from Liverpool's International Slavery Museum commemorating Black History month.

John and Vera Scarth are moving to Worthing at the end of next week. There is a card in St Francis' Church to sign. Here is a photo of them with a framed St Francis' prayer that they received from the church this week.



Advent wreaths are a symbol of Advent. They are made of a circle of evergreen laid flat to represent eternal life, four red candles are arranged around the circle and one candle is in the centre. Advent is a journey through the Christmas story. Christians use this wreath to celebrate Advent, lighting one candle each Sunday till Christmas Day when the last central candle is lit representing Christ the Light of the World. This year the first candle will be lit on November 29th. It is particularly significant this year as we may not be able to see our families and it also makes a nice table decoration for Christmas. If anyone would like to place an order, please contact Merri Womack on 8777 8772. The cost of an advent wreath is £8.

Brian Griffiths has created a catalogue of woodwork he has produced using his scroll saw and lathe. All the craft is being sold in aid of St Mary's and St Francis' churches. The catalogue is attached to this week's email to St Francis and St Mary's congregations. Details of how to buy one of the 52 items listed and illustrated are included in the catalogue. Please contact Brian by telephone on 0208 777 6112 or by email at brian.griff19@btinternet.com to reserve a piece.

The sanctuary pedestal at St. Mary's has been provided by Bob Mason and family in memory of Jan whose anniversary occurs this week-end. It has been arranged by Merri.

Any items for the joint pew sheet to Beryl bbolton@ntlworld.com and items for the websites to brian.griff19@btinternet.com.

Collect

Merciful God,
teach us to be faithful in
change and uncertainty,
that trusting in your word
and obeying your will
we may enter the unfailing
joy of Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading:**Nehemiah 8: 1-4a, 8-12**

¹ All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴ The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; ⁸ So they read from the book, from the law of God, with

interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.' ¹¹ So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, 'Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.' ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Gospel:**Matthew 24: 30-35**

³⁰ Jesus said to his disciples: The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and

then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven" with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. ³² 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Post Communion Prayer

God of all grace, your Son Jesus Christ fed the hungry with the bread of his life and the word of his kingdom: renew your people with your heavenly grace, and in all our weakness sustain us by your true and living bread; who is alive and reigns, now and for ever.

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TALK: Hazel O'Sullivan

Our whole world has turned upside down during the past few months. I wonder where you've gained your strength from during this time. Has it been family and friends? Has it been a new hobby – maybe some baking or other creative activity? Or maybe it's been exercise – were you a devotee of the daily Joe Wicks workouts?

We're now at a bit of a turning point as the incidence of coronavirus cases rises, but it's no longer about surviving a crisis. No, now it's all about rebuilding towards a new way of living so that we can get through the months ahead without another crisis.

This is similar in some ways to the context in which our Old Testament reading from Nehemiah is set. The timing is after the Jewish exile in Babylon when people returned to live in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was that city which held so much meaning for the Jews – this was the site of the temple, this was the place where they regularly offered sacrifices to God. And then the Babylonians had destroyed the city and had taken the educated classes away from their homeland, while the poorest were left behind in truly desolate surroundings.

70 years passed before the educated Jewish people began to return to Jerusalem. And initially, nothing happened – the task of rebuilding was just too overwhelming. Nehemiah hears of the trouble that everyone was facing, how the city was still in a state of disrepair and therefore still under threat from attack. Nehemiah was a visionary leader who recognised the problems being faced in his homeland. He returned to Jerusalem to mobilise the inhabitants, so that the walls of the city could be re-built, and they could begin to feel secure again.

Our reading takes place a few months after the city walls had been rebuilt and everyone had had time to settle in their towns. On this day all the nobles and officials, as well as the people, were gathered together in the square in front of one of the gates of the city. They asked the priest, Ezra, to read from the book of the law. This was Israel's most sacred scripture. And they stood there from early in the morning to midday (that's five or six hours) in rapt attention. They weren't sitting down in comfortable seats (like you are at home), or even uncomfortable pews like here at St Mary's. And they were packed into a small space together – unable to socially distance from others: do you remember those days? Here were all the people – young, old, men, women, literate, illiterate – it didn't matter, they all wanted to hear God's word and were prepared to go through some discomfort to do so. The fact that it was all the people there is important. It wasn't just the men. It wasn't just the educated classes. It wasn't just the religious people. And I suspect that it wasn't that they were all

listening to one charismatic man speak. They had Levites scattered through the crowd who could interpret the scripture and make sense of it – we hear that in v8. The Levites were able to remind them that their story followed a history of people who'd been rescued from slavery in Egypt, a people who'd been taken care of in the wilderness and brought into a promised land.

The impact of the reading of scripture was for the people to cry. They got very emotional remembering what God had done for them. Nehemiah took that emotion and made the response to God a joyous feast. The Jews were able to rejoice that they'd again been brought out of captivity back to their promised land.

So, this was to be a holy day. A day to rejoice because God had remained with the people, even through their difficult time of exile and rebuilding the city. The people gathered round God's word to gain meaning, strength and hope.

Living in exile for 70 years was tough, but building a new life amid much uncertainty was even harder - does that sound familiar? Yes, we thought lockdown was tough, but the uncertainty associated with our current situation is harder and we don't come from a position of strength, having spent many weeks already living with restrictions on our movements. And so, our situation can be likened in some ways to that of the Jewish people in the reading.

So, can we use the bible to gain meaning, strength and hope? It's the bible that helps us to remember that we are a part of that story of a God who acts to take care of his chosen people. Those Levites scattered through the crowd are a bit like our home group leaders who make sense of our Bible today. Are you tapped into a particular bible resource or a group of people who can help you to gain that understanding of the Bible? As well as some of the home groups continuing, we've also continued in Morning Prayer – a time when I and others who've been receiving daily emails, have been able to come to God's word and reflect on what it might be saying to us.

Is the bible like a dusty history book to you or does it help you to feel part of a bigger story? A story which is about God your creator talking about your past and making sense of your own experiences, in the context of this story? Isn't that an awesome thought – God's story being your story.

This is what we're enabling through reading God's word today on a Sunday in church. We're building a community where emotions can surface and deep things can be

discussed. We come to church on a Sunday because this is resurrection day – this is the day of the week when Jesus was found to have risen from the dead. This is the day that we look to, to recognise that we've been set free from the bondage of sin.

This is the message of hope that the whole of the bible points towards and this is something that's always available. That's why the first thing that we put in place in lockdown was a continuation of our weekly readings and a reflection on them. This is the most important aspect of our community – as one rooted in the gospel of Christ.

At the end of today's gospel reading Jesus says that, even when heaven and earth pass away (by which he was referring to his second coming), even then his words will not pass away. This comes from a chapter of the gospel about persecution, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the final judgement. It is difficult to separate the parts about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD from the parts about the final judgement at the end of time. In the first century when the gospel was being written the destruction of Jerusalem seemed to be following the pattern of what had happened just over 600 years earlier in the time of Nehemiah. It must have seemed that the world was indeed falling apart. Christians needed to know that God was faithful and reliable and this is what Matthew was trying to tell them. In the twenty-first century we also need to know that.

In the reading from Nehemiah God's people experienced a new depth of community as they gathered around God's word. Over the next few months, no doubt we will have reason to cry together and celebrate together, lament and laugh. As we do so, if we remain rooted in God's word, we will discover that allowing emotions to surface and deep things to be discussed through vulnerability and generosity, we will be able to rebuild a truly authentic community, whether in the room or on Zoom.

We're no longer thinking about surviving a crisis, but about rebuilding a new way of living. Now is a time for renewal. And I pray that we will look to the Bible as the source of our meaning, strength and hope during this time.

I'm going to finish with a verse from psalm 119:105:

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Amen.

Prayer Pointers

Thank God for the gift of his holy word that gives us meaning, strength and hope in our lives. Help us to build a community where, through studying the Bible, emotions can surface and deep things can be discussed especially in the toughest of times. May God's eternal word be a lamp to our feet and a light for our paths.

Pray for the people of Wales in a strict lockdown until 9th November and especially for Ministers and congregations of churches in Wales who are unable to worship together or carry out pastoral visiting during this time. For all who are subject to strict Covid restrictions especially for those businesses that were struggling before the new tiers came into force and for all who fear they may lose their jobs.

For Governments around the world battling the Covid pandemic and for all Government advisers and scientists as they seek to bring in sensible controls and find a vaccine. Pray especially for the USA as that country approaches the Presidential Election on November 3rd. May truth, respect and justice be at the forefront of the campaign.

Pray for all those who find themselves homeless during this pandemic. Pray especially for those who have been forced to leave their homes in tower blocks because of fire safety risks – for young families who are being uprooted through no fault of their own. For all those working in council housing departments and housing associations who will have to find new accommodation for them.

For all those who are ill at home or in hospital, especially for those suffering from mental health problems made worse by isolation in lockdown. Pray for our local hospital – The Bethlem Royal – for all doctors, nurses and healthcare professionals who work there. Pray for all relatives and friends of those in hospital who are unable to visit because of Covid restrictions. May they trust in you and find that peace which passes all understanding.

A prayer as London has entered Tier 2 in response to Covid-19, by the Very Reverend Andrew Nunn, Dean of Southwark

Ever-present God, be with us in our isolation,
be close to us in our distancing,
be healing in our sickness,
be joy in our sadness, be light in our darkness,
be wisdom in our confusion,

be all that is familiar when all is unfamiliar,
that when the doors reopen
we may with the zeal of Pentecost inhabit our communities
and speak of your goodness to an emerging world.
For Jesus' sake. **Amen.**