

Worship at Home—11 July 2021

Rev Easter Smart

Call to Worship

Let us make a joyful noise,

Let us come before God with thanksgiving in our hearts,

Let us celebrate the blessing of the presence of God all around us,

For God has been good to us.

Let us worship and give thanks to the Lord,

Let us pray

Opening Prayer



It is with great sadness
that we have to
intimate the deaths of

Jessie Downie
Forthview Road

and

Jean Thomson
Easter Currie Terrace

Please pray for the
families

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

God, our God

This morning we worship You.

We come together in spirit, each of us from our own lives,
with our own thoughts, and hopes, and worries.

Let us bring our hearts, with all that weighs on them, before You this morning in
worship.

And unburden us, do not let us be weighed down,
but instead send Your Spirit anew among us, and clear in our hearts and minds a
space to focus on You and our relationship with You.

For we come, thirsty—longing for refreshment.

For we come hungry—longing for sustenance.

We come as Your children: and long to know Your love.

And here in this time of prayer;
in this quiet and unlaboured moment—
we can trace the steps of the paths that brought us here.
Our Sunday morning waking and journey here;
our Saturday and the week that has been.
As Your people, we've known joy, comfort, fatigue, and pain;
love and hope, loneliness and strain.
But as we cast our thoughts back, Lord,
give us eyes to see that You have been with us all along.

Gives us hearts to know of Your presence, not just today,
but every day in our walk with You,
and that in our worship we will remember Your constancy in every moment of our lives.

You are the God who freely loves.

You have no needs or requirements; the whole universe belongs to You:

yet as infinite, majestic and glorious God:

You concern Yourself with us.

You care for us.

You know us.

In Jesus Christ You walked among us and demonstrated a love so perfect,
that all human history will unravel before we comprehend its depth, width, and height. We thank you for
his love, his witness, his forgiveness and his presence and we ask you to hear us now as we share the
prayer Jesus taught us.

Our Father, who art in heaven; hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever.

Amen

SCRIPTURE: ROMANS 1: 8-17

Paul's Longing to Visit Rome and his passionate faith

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.

God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will may be opened for me to come to you.

I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

For I AM
NOT ASHAMED
of the GOSPEL, because
IT IS
THE POWER of GOD
for the Salvation of EVERYONE
WHO BELIEVES.

SERMON

John Calvin, described Paul's letter to the Romans as the "rarest treasure of scripture."

Martin Luther said, "The Epistle to the Romans . . . is so valuable that a Christian should not only have every word of it read by heart but should take it about with him as the daily bread of his soul." Paul's clear letter to the Romans is often regarded as the most influential letter in two thousand years of Christianity and it provides the foundation of the reformation.

Paul was writing to the young struggling community of early Christians around 57 AD, in the city of Rome, whose empire had already begun its decline and fall. Paul was yearning to see them, to encourage them, to share fellowship with them and to build up their faith. This faith which unites them across many long miles.

We all speak of having a Christian faith, and it might be different for each of us. Saint Paul has given us a great insight into the essence of real faith. Paul writes about faith so positively, so passionately, so personally—he invites us to explore this concept of faith as a gift, sometimes as an energy. . . a source of life, fellowship and mutual encouragement. He says this when he expresses his longings to see them, to be with them. Despite his sufferings and his adversities and all the hardships and ridicules he had endured, he was able to proclaim:

"I am so proud of the Good news! It is God's powerful way of saving all people who have faith, whether Jews or Gentiles."

In this time of Covid, we can identify with Paul's longings to be reunited with his friends in the fellowship of the church and he is praying for the day when faith will bring them together, when they may share faith and build one another up in faith. How much we long for that fellowship when we can share our faith and build one another up once again face to face, not simply on a screen or in writing, as Paul had to make do.

My dad had some books and writings in his study looking at Paul's idea of faith.

The book of Hebrews says, "Faith is hope in things unseen."

I remember once sitting in on a bible study with a lady named Sarah—she was well into her 80's and she had a great ability to laugh at herself.

During the bible study she was very sleepy but she woke suddenly as we were discussing the relationship between faith and hope. Sharp as a tack, Sarah said, "All my life I have been bug-eyed and bow legged. I still hope to find a man, but I don't have faith that I will."

There are often misconceptions about the idea of faith, even in the church. Sometimes it is helpful to look at common misunderstandings of faith and then try to understand faith that Paul speaks about.

Firstly, faith is not giving assent to doctrines about God, or about creation or Jesus Christ. Faith does not solely concern itself with beliefs, doctrines or traditions. The creeds of the Christian Faith, are important to us because help us define the our beliefs but they are not in and of themselves faith.

Faith is not accepting authority, whether that be the authority of the Church, or parents, traditions or teachers. Faith is not something someone else can prescribe or dictate. It is not an absolute. It has to be something personal, within. Something internal, not external.

Thirdly faith is not a vague spirituality or an emotional feeling. Since Covid we all need to feel a bit better and I know that so many areas of life, including some churches are based on a feel-good about life approach encouraging good emotions and self help. Faith goes deeper than that.

Lastly faith is not a fix for the suffering and pain of the world. There are many detractors who tell us that faith is a lie. Many clever thinkers from the French existential philosophers to the Marxist revolution will tell us that to have faith is a preposterous idea. Nietzsche, Marx, described faith as an opiate for the masses, a pie in the sky based on illusions, a fuel for class struggle or psychological. They say belief in God is a myth, a crutch for humanity, that faith is futile and belief in God is absurd.

Authentic Christian faith is none of these: not an acceptance of authority, nor doctrine, nor a vague emotional feel-good factor, nor the lie of dependence or delusion.

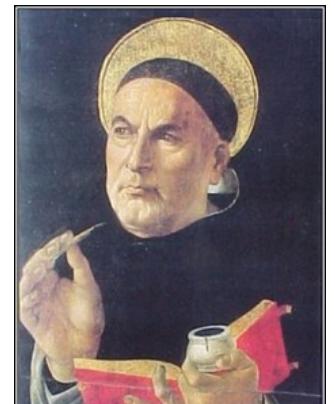
The faith that Paul is so passionate and excited about is a faith that holds him steady. It is a faith that defines his person, his life, his being and his activity and ministry as a person.

Paul's understanding of faith is not a static thing. Not a fact or a belief system, or a personal coping mechanism. For Paul, faith is a way of life, that forms everything about one's character, person, community involvement, fellowship and ministry. It only exists and it only works in relationship with God and by inviting God to be present with us individually and together.

There is a little book here about Thomas Aquinas. Thomas Aquinas was a saint, a scholar, teacher and hymn writer who lived in Italy during the 13th Century and who devoted his whole life to helping people understand the faith that keeps us going. His faithful influence, even on contemporary spiritual thinking is profound.

Thomas Aquinas wrote *Summa Theologiae*, a book about natural theology. He began his teachings on faith with the idea that there are three elements to faith.

Firstly, believing.
Secondly, believing in,
and thirdly, believing into.



According to Aquinas, the first stage, 'believing' goes to the heart of human existence and experience. It implies a way of knowing or understanding something that we cannot physically see nor intellectually explain.

An obvious example to explain Aquinas' idea of believing is friendship. Friendship is a gift from God and an extension of our faith. Yet is not something we define or decide. A friend is someone who sees the light in us, who helps unveil the joy in our soul. Friendship, like faith is a spiritual gift which discover—a friend is someone that we just know and feel cares, trusts, listens, and speaks the truth to us in love. Aquinas wrote, "*There is nothing on earth to be prized more than friendship.*"

And so Aquinas believed the first stage of faith is believing. He explained, "*God himself caused me to believe. I did not move myself to agree to the articles of faith.*"

Aquinas describes the next level of faith as “believing in.” As Christians we are not only aware of the reality of God, but we focus on belief in someone . . . the revelation of God, the presence of God in Jesus. Again, this is more than believing in just the teachings or ideas of Jesus. According to Aquinas, such a faith is far more than simply counting on or having confidence in or optimism about Jesus Christ. What is required when we believe in Jesus is total surrender in the depths of our being to God’s word spoken and lived then and now in the person of Jesus. In Romans, it is clear, that Saint Paul’s faith revolved and reverberates around the faith he has in Jesus Christ.

Aquinas wrote great volumes and so this meditation is really only paraphrasing his great work and probably not doing him enough justice . . . but his ideas are helpful, even to those of us who are not mighty theological scholars.

His next stage is believing into. For Christians our faith is not something we are meant to select and then park in the corner. As with Paul, our faith impacts every aspect of our life. Many Christian thinkers from St Paul, to Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, even CS Lewis have noted that it is often only when our own self-sufficiency, self-dependency finds us lost and floundering that we may have that experience when our hand draws close to the hand of Jesus Christ that he may grasp us by the hand and take hold of our lives. “Believing into” turns our lives, yours and mine into an adventure when we can move ahead humbly and yet with Christ’s strength to face every adversity, every defeat or difficulty, and even death. This is the power of faith . . . to recognise that all the trials of this world are temporary and we already belong to God in heaven through Christ who is with us. This aspect of faith is deeply personal and devotional. Paul was able to write, *“In all circumstances I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* (Philippians 4:13)

This is also a faith that calls us together in the friendship of fellowship in the Church—even though like Paul, we are longing for that fellowship, longing that by the grace of God we may meet and pray and learn and sing face to face to God’s glory. Such a faith is practical, unlimited, inexhaustible and eternal, just as God’s energy is inexhaustible and eternal.

And so, this ‘believing,’ and ‘believing in,’ and ‘believing into,’ enables us to face the future with strength, thanksgiving, joy.

In a world of Christian legalism and sometimes plagued with church dogma and doctrine, rules and regulations, how uplifting to read Romans and to be reminded that our faith, is a believing into faith . . . that is a journey of growth and relationship. According to Paul, and to Aquinas has to be a the real, living, faith—discovering the relationship with God as a true friend who can be trusted to be with us, every day.

I close with a prayer from Thomas Aquinas

Grant me, O Lord my God, a mind to know you, a heart to seek you, wisdom to find you, conduct pleasing to you, faithful perseverance in waiting for you, and a hope of finally embracing you.

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Ever loving God, each one of us this day, young or old can acknowledge a hunger for a stronger faith.

Feed us and nurture us. Encourage us with that faith that makes all things possible, the faith we can have in Jesus Christ.

We bring to You our prayers for others and ourselves

Lord we ask that You bless and guide Your church here in this parish and throughout the world, helping us to reach out to others, sharing with them the good news of Christ and standing with those who are most in need of our help, love and support.

Guide us in our relationships with others, within our families, with friends, neighbours
Fill our homes and communities with the warmth of Your love, may we learn to love and accept all.
Pour out Your Spirit into the world, bless those struggling with poverty and homelessness, evil and war.

We pray for places where conflicts are causing millions of people to face starvation. Places like Ethiopia, Yemen, Palestine . . . we ask that your people might get the medical care and food they need.

We pray for women in India, Pakistan, and Africa who are speaking up and speaking out against rape, exploitation and abuse. We pray they may be heard. Give them courage, strength and unity.

Help us all to reach out to those who are in need, despite the lockdowns.

Bless those who are ill at home or in hospital, those who are feeling anxious or low,.
May they know Your love and sense Your presence with them and may we as a church reach out to them in their time of need.

Bless the leaders of nations and people.
Guide them in the decisions that they make, ensuring they work hard and fight for the people they represent.

Lord, may we always sense Your presence in our lives and in the lives of others.

Transform us to be the people that You would have us be.

All of this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ,
our Lord and Saviour

Amen

Blessing

May God give you strength
to face any giant.
May God persuade you
to meet them with grace
and may what no longer fits
be left behind,
your armour being rather that
of love and truth.



Photograph taken from the Water of Leith

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