

ORDER OF SERVICE – Worship at Home 24/10/21 – Bible Sunday
A service prepared by Karen Frost for use at home

Today is Bible Sunday when we think of and thank God for His word written in the Bible, and for the work of the Bible Societies throughout the world. I'm using some of the resources available from the Bible Society as we worship together. You may wish to open your Bible to Isaiah, Chapter 5 verse 1. Today's reading will be included in the sermon, rather than being read separately.

Call to worship

This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. ¹

Hymn: STF 57 – George Herbert (1593-1633)

Let all the world in every corner sing:

My God and King!

The heavens are not too high,

His praise, may thither fly;

The earth is not too low,

His praises there may grow.

Let all the world in every corner sing:

My God and King!

Let all the world in every corner sing:

My God and King!

The Church with psalms must shout,

No door can keep them out;

But above all, the heart

Must bear the longest part.

Let all the world in every corner sing:

My God and King!

Prayer

All seeing God, you are so far beyond our understanding, yet you want to meet with me. You call me into your presence, as the crowd called a blind man to come to Jesus. I come to you now, mighty Lord, expectantly, ready to worship and learn from you. May I have eyes open to see you and a heart willing to be seen by you. Amen

Confession

Heavenly Father, time and again I get things wrong. In a moment of quiet, I choose to say sorry to you for those things. **SILENCE**

Know that your sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and rejoice in His goodness and grace. Amen. Thanks be to God.

A story from the Bible Society working in the Middle East entitled 'They were thirsty to know more about Jesus'

Last year, the Bible Society of Lebanon asked for prayer after the chemical blast in the capital Beirut that killed more than 200 people and left 7,500 injured. This year God answered those prayers. Bible worker Camille Safar told us this: 'Thanks to all the prayers and support received we were able to repair the Bible Society Centre and continue with our ministry. Free Scriptures were distributed to people affected by the explosion to help them gain hope again.' Almost 9,000 Bibles or Scripture portions were distributed free or highly subsidised to families whose homes were damaged in the blast. Thousands of Bibles were also reduced dramatically in price to make them more accessible to a population affected by rampant inflation and poverty. Camille said that shifting to online (on the computer) ministry during the pandemic enabled the Bible mission team in Lebanon to reach many more young people. He said, 'They were thirsty to know more about Jesus and engage with the Scriptures.'

He said that in the first quarter of 2020 before the pandemic took hold 2,100 young people were reached online. Whereas in the first quarter of this year it was almost 20 times the amount with 40,000 young people engaging with the Scriptures online! There is no doubt that in Lebanon, despite the poverty there, the seeds are being sown.

A prayer: Thank you, God, for the amazing response of young people in Lebanon to hearing your word. Please let the seeds sown in their hearts grow so that they will form a real relationship with Jesus. I pray that more people will turn to you in Lebanon. **Amen**

Hymn: STF 156 (Keith Getty and Stuart Townend) ²

From the breaking of the dawn to the setting of the sun,
I will stand on every promise of your Word.
Words of power, strong to save, that will never pass away;
I will stand on every promise of your Word.
For your covenant is sure, and on this I am secure:
I can stand on every promise of your Word.

When I stumble and I sin, condemnation pressing in,
I will stand on every promise of your Word.
You are faithful to forgive, that in freedom I might live,
So I stand on every promise of your Word.
Guilt to innocence restored: you remember sins no more.
So I'll stand on every promise of your Word.

When I'm faced with anguished choice, I will listen for your voice,
And I'll stand on every promise of your Word.
Through this dark and troubled land, you will guide me with your hand
As I stand on every promise of your Word.
And you've promised to complete every work begun in me,
So I'll stand on every promise of your Word.

Hope that lifts me from despair; love that casts out every fear,
As I stand on every promise of your Word.
Not forsaken, not alone, for the Comforter has come,
And I stand on every promise of your Word.
Grace sufficient, grace for me, grace for all who will believe.
We will stand on every promise of your Word.

Talk prepared for Bible Sunday by Joel Edwards a Bible Communicator at the Bible Society.

The invitation, our call.

You might still remember the first moment you experienced something resembling normal this year. What was it? Perhaps it was the gym, jumping on the bus, a shopping trip in town, meeting a friend for coffee. Whatever it was, there was probably the feeling: 'We're finally coming out of this.' In the Bible passage we're going to look at today we're going to find people coming out of something too. Isaiah 55 has a message for exiles returning home. Israel's exile had lasted 70 years. That was 70 years away from any kind of normality; 70 years away from away from home; and worst of all, 70 years away from the temple – from the presence of God.

Isaiah 55 is written for Israel's return. But what were they feeling? Disappointed? Fearful? Hurt? Perhaps, done with God? After all, where had he been in the middle of all this? If this sounds familiar, it's because it's a common human experience. Theologian Andrew Ollerton says: 'Exile is more than just an event in the Bible. It's a deep metaphor that explains a universal condition that we still experience today'. So, what are you like coming out of exile? Perhaps you may be just relieved this is all done, and ready to get on with things again. But if we're honest, we might be feeling disappointed, hurt or full of fear. Perhaps we're feeling like giving up, or already have. Perhaps we're done with God, or questioning where he's been in all of this.

Israel's experience of exile is in some ways like ours – but there is an invitation within the Bible which, if we respond to it, can change everything.

1. The Invitation

¹Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. ²Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. ³Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. (Isaiah 55: 1–3) ¹

The invitation is to all who are 'thirsty'. They are those who thirst for more, for a life without the pains of emptiness, to those who thirst for love – and keep looking in all the wrong places. They are those who thirst for justice in their own lives and in the life of the world. Furthermore, it's those who 'have no money' who are invited to the banquet. In Hebrew thinking this could mean the poor, but also the outsider. It's not just the one who doesn't know when the next pay cheque is arriving, but it's the one who feels they have nothing to offer; the one who feels they've been forgotten. You don't have to qualify or measure up in some way. This banquet is free.

The invitation is to all those who labour. The prophet is in tune with those who are working themselves into the ground without seeing any lasting results. This may be our experience too. If we are working in order to be a success, to matter, to be liked, we're invited to stop.

The invitation is to life. Verse 3 says: 'Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.' To a people that would have known the Bible story, this would have really hit home. Go back to the beginning of the story. God made a beautiful world and in it a beautiful garden – a place for people to live and work and worship him. There a river flowed, bringing life to all. Turn the page, and by Genesis 3, we see humans rebelling and turning from God. This is our human condition – to do away with God. There is a deep drought within us all and it leaves us in the wilderness. But God doesn't give up.

Throughout the Biblical story, there are many moments where God continues to rescue and meet his people's needs – often at places of water. God provides at wells (like Jacob), through springs in the desert (like Hagar) or oases in the wilderness (as he did for Israel in the Exodus). All these stories show us how radically committed God is to his people despite their rebellion. This is his covenant – his promise. God says: 'Regardless of how you've treated me, I will never forsake you. I am going to love you to the end and bring you back.' To a people coming out of exile, God says: 'Don't stop believing! My covenant is everlasting'.

The invitation is from Jesus.

Jesus is God coming good on his word. Jesus is God bringing this water of real life to the world again. Jesus is God's faithful love and covenant with skin and flesh on. As Jesus died on the cross he said, 'I am thirsty!'. Of course Jesus was physically thirsty, but he also said this as a symbol of what the cross was achieving. He thirsted so we don't have to. He took on our death, so we can have his life. He was exiled, so we can come home. He was abandoned, so that we can know love.

And in John 7.37 he says: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink'. His promise really is for anyone and everyone. Some of us might find it hard to accept an invitation like that. We might struggle to think we could be loved. We live in a world of flaky and fragile relationships, where it's easy for us to be cancelled if we do or say one wrong thing, or dropped if we don't make the grade. We might think that God is the same. 'Will he cancel me? Will he drop me? Does he realise who he's really inviting?' But God isn't like that.

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.' (Isaiah 55.8–9) ¹

In these verses he is saying, I don't respond like you. My love is not like your love. I am not like the other people in your life. I cannot go back on my word. You simply don't have a way of measuring or even understanding the sheer depth and width and height of my love. A love like this means we can come out of exile – despite all the uncertainty we face – secure in the knowledge that we are loved. We can stop trying to fill our emptiness, trying to prove ourselves and endlessly labouring. We can rest, in the knowledge that we will always be loved. This is the invitation.

2. Our call

But God never invites in without calling out. The very invitation we enter into becomes our call. This is a pattern we see through the whole Bible. God tells Abraham that he would bless him, and that he should go and be a blessing to others. He reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush, then tells him to go to Pharaoh. And Jesus said, 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you'. (John 20: 21) ¹

So, what is our call? ⁵ Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendour." ⁶ Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ⁷ Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.' (Isaiah 55: 5–7) ¹

Israel's call was to go to the nations that did not know God and call on them to turn and run to him so that they too might live. We've been called to invite others to what we ourselves were invited into. And as we come out of our exile, the invitation has never been more needed or more relevant. After all, this was a people returning from exile. They were battered, bruised, and filled with doubt and fear – surely not a people fit for sending! But the call of God doesn't wait for those who are already strong, capable and confident. It comes to us in our weakness, and in our doubt and fear. And if we're sensing that we're not ready – not good enough for sending – God has us right where he wants us, where he can give us his own courage.

¹⁰As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55: 10–11) ¹

The promises of God are as sure and certain as the rain that falls from the sky. Just as it brings new life and growth, so will the word of God. This is what God says to a fearful Israel coming out of exile, and he says the same to us today: ‘My word will not fail. Take heart.’ This is a promise we need to hear, because fear plays such a massive role in our lives and we’re so easily discouraged by our own fearfulness. You might have dreamed a dream, or felt a conviction that you could make a difference, only to be prevented by fear. Fear is natural. Courage, though, is a choice – and the world needs a courageous Church. Courage doesn’t deny fear, but it says that fear isn’t the only thing there – there is something greater. The people returning from exile need to hear that God’s word will not return to him empty. Imagine if we as the Church refused to let fear have the last word. Imagine what would happen in our communities and in our world if we really had this sort of faith in God’s unfailing word, and if we really were willing to accept God’s call on our lives.

In Closing

Ephesians 2: 10 says, ‘For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do’.¹ Just like the unique touch ID that allows you into your phone, God has uniquely shaped and wired you, your experiences, your language, your background, to make you the key to touching and transforming other people’s lives. As the American theologian Tim Keller says: ‘There are some needs only you can see. There are some hands only you can hold. There are some people only you can reach’. So have you responded to the invitation? May God give you courage as the invitation you’ve accepted becomes your call.

Prayers

‘For it is you who light my lamp; the Lord my God lightens my darkness.’ (Psalm 18: 28) ³

Think: In what way can you walk more closely with God? Identify a key step you can take.

Pray: Thank you that I have been reached by your word. Please create opportunities for the Bible to be shared with more people, here in this country as well as around the world. Please inspire mission workers, church leaders and individuals to communicate your promises to others. Amen

‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.’ (Matthew 11: 28) ¹

Think: about people and situations in the world that need prayer today.

Pray: Lord, I offer to you all those who need your loving touch in their lives today. May they know your healing, your love, your protection, safety and peace. Give them assurance that all will be well. Amen

Now say the Lord’s Prayer out loud:

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.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen

Hymn: STF 470 (Timothy Dudley-Smith) ⁴

Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided,
Urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
Sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided,
Lord for the years, we bring our thanks today.

Lord, for that word, the Word of life which fires us,
Speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,
Teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us,
Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.

Lord, for our land in this our generation,
Spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care;
For young and old, for commonwealth and nation,
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.

Lord, for our world where we disown and doubt you,
Loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain;
Hungry and helpless, lost indeed without you,
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.

Lord for ourselves; in living power remake us,
Self on the cross, and Christ upon the throne,
Past put behind us, for the future take us,
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

Blessing

The Lord bless me and keep me;
the Lord make his face shine on me, and be gracious to me;
the Lord turn his face towards me and give me his peace;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with me and all those I love, this day and always. Amen.

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