Home Service Sheet Sunday 17th December 2023

Call to Worship:                  Isaiah 61:1-4

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,

    because the Lord has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor;

    he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives,

    and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,

    and the day of vengeance of our God;

    to comfort all who mourn;

to grant to those who mourn in Zion -

    to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,

the oil of gladness instead of mourning,

    the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;

that they may be called oaks of righteousness,

    the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

They shall build up the ancient ruins;

    they shall raise up the former devastations;

they shall repair the ruined cities,

    the devastations of many generations.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You and praise You for the gift of Your Son, the Lord Jesus, who came into this world full of grace and truth. We thank You too for sending Your Holy Spirit to come and dwell within us so that we would be enabled to live as Your people here and now. In Your Word we read about the wonderful hope of the Gospel, for which we praise You. Remind us afresh of all that we have to thank You for this day. In Jesus’ Name we pray, amen.

Hymn Hark! The Glad Sound by Philip Doddridge

<https://youtu.be/cYTsIvbwETY?si=CZZEmqhGqqapa1Ad>

Hark! the glad sound, the Saviour comes, the Saviour promised long;

Let every heart prepare a throne, and every voice a song.

He comes, the prisoners to release in Satan’s bondage held:

The gates of brass before Him burst, the iron fetters yield.

He comes, from thickest films of vice to clear the mental ray,

And on the darkness of the blind to pour celestial day.

He comes, the broken heart to bind, the bleeding soul to cure,

And with the treasures of His grace to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, Thy welcome shall proclaim;

And Heaven’s eternal arches ring with Thy belovèd name.

The Lord’s Prayer

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 trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Bible Reading Luke 1:46-56

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

    and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

    For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for he who is mighty has done great things for me,

    and holy is his name.

And his mercy is for those who fear him

    from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

    he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

he has brought down the mighty from their thrones

    and exalted those of humble estate;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

    and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

    in remembrance of his mercy,

as he spoke to our fathers,

    to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Reflection

Throughout the Scriptures we find a number of songs or poems written by women and men in praise of God and what He has done for His people. The Psalms are the hymn book of both the Jews and the Church. Hannah spoke out a poem of praise at the birth of her son, Samuel, as did Mary in our Bible reading today. Deborah’s victory was commemorated by a song of praise and even Paul writes about singing hymns and spiritual songs to God. Singing, making music and speaking out poetry to God are all part of the biblical picture of worship that we find in both the Old and New Testaments. Although music is often emotional, it is most powerful and meaningful when it expresses great truths also.

Our reading today is taken from Luke’s account of the time that Mary spends with her cousin Elizabeth, whilst both women are expecting their babies, Jesus and John. Just prior to this, Elizabeth has expressed her wonder at the baby who is living and growing inside Mary. She, in turn, responds with these magnificent and well-known words of praise and thanksgiving to God. Traditionally it is called ‘the Magnificat’, which comes from the Latin translation of the first words of this song. “My soul magnifies the Lord!” cries out Mary in praise of God. In this phrase Mary is expressing her desire to lift up and glorify God who has done a marvellous thing in sending His Son to be born of her.

As we read through this song we notice that Mary understands that this role that God has given to her is given because of God’s grace and not because of any goodness or worthiness in her. Mary speaks of her humble condition before God, and certainly this is a good example for us to follow as we approach the Lord in prayer. In the letter of James, quoting from the Greek translation of Proverbs 3:34, we read that “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (James 4:6) The message is consistent in that we should come to God in humility, recognising that we need His grace and mercy. He is the almighty Creator of all things, and we are the weak, sinful creatures that He has made. Yet He loves us and chooses to use us as part of His plan.

Mary also speaks of God’s mercy being for those who fear Him. This is a key idea in the Bible – we are to fear the Lord. That is not to say that we fear His punishment, because if we have believed in Christ we will not receive punishment from Him. Rather we are to have a reverence and awe for God that recognises who He is and seeks to bring Him the praise and glory that He deserves. God loves us and sent His Son to die for us, but that does not by any means suggest that we can take His love for granted. Rather we are to respond to it by offering our very lives as living sacrifices, or bond-slaves (choosing to make ourselves His servants) to live in complete obedience to Him.

Mary’s song also speaks of God providing for the hungry, the humble and the poor. This is another theme we see throughout Scripture, and yet we know from our own experience that there are still many people in this world who are starving, living in poverty and generally struggling. Jesus Himself said that we will always have the poor with us (Mark 14:7). So what does Mary mean by saying what she does? Is it perhaps an assurance that God will ultimately do what is right at the final judgment? Certainly He will do that, but I’m not entirely sure that is what is in view here. Maybe it is about spiritual hunger and poverty. Jesus, in the sermon on the mount, teaches that the poor in spirit will be blessed, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied (Matthew 5:6).

In Jesus Christ, through faith in Him, our spiritual needs and desires are perfectly met. Jesus came to earth full of grace and truth, not because we deserved God’s greatest gift, but because of His love for us and mercy towards us. Mary’s song reminds us of all that God has done for us throughout history, starting with His special people Israel, and continuing to bless all peoples through Abraham’s seed, Jesus. If Mary, who only had a partial picture of what God would do through His Son, could utter such magnificent words of praise, how much more so should we be able to bring God the thanks and praise that He deserves. Amen!

Prayer

Loving Father, we stand in awe of Your amazing grace and wonderful goodness. The more we come to understand Your indescribable love towards us, the more our soul and spirit unite in glorifying Your holy Name and worshipping You, our Saviour and Lord. Thank You that you gave Your eternal Son to be born as Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem, and Saviour of the world. Gracious God, increase our longing and desire for You, we pray. We know that it is only as we seek You in poverty of spirit that our hearts are fully satisfied. Father, we trust You to supply all our temporal needs as well as our spiritual ones. Thank You for the godly examples of women like Anna, Elisabeth, and Mary, who relied on You and trusted Your Word. May each of us become such examples to others during our time on earth. Create in us an ever-deeper, heart-longing for You. This we pray in the Name of Jesus, amen.

Benediction

Heavenly Father, we ask today that Your hope may live in our hearts. Help us to make the most of every opportunity to share the hope of Christ with people we meet. This we ask to Your glory and in the Name of Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, amen.