Home Service Sheet 24th September 2023

Call To Worship Psalm 65:5-13

By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness,

 O God of our salvation,

the hope of all the ends of the earth

 and of the farthest seas;

the one who by his strength established the mountains,

 being girded with might;

who stills the roaring of the seas,

 the roaring of their waves,

 the tumult of the peoples,

so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs.

You make the going out of the morning and the evening to shout for joy.

You visit the earth and water it;

 you greatly enrich it;

the river of God is full of water;

 you provide their grain,

 for so you have prepared it.

You water its furrows abundantly,

 settling its ridges,

softening it with showers,

 and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty;

 your wagon tracks overflow with abundance.

The pastures of the wilderness overflow,

 the hills gird themselves with joy,

the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,

 the valleys deck themselves with grain,

 they shout and sing together for joy.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, as we look at the world around us we see Your handiwork. Not only have You made the stars and planets, mountains and animals, but You send the sunshine and the rain that we need for life to flourish and crops to grow. Without Your touch and provision life would cease and darkness would swallow up all of creation. You alone, O Lord, are the giver and sustainer of life and eternal life. We praise You and thank You for making the Earth and everything in it. We glorify You for continuing to tend the world, it’s plants and animals. Help us to recognise Your work in creation, and hear Your Words that You have given us in the Scriptures. We ask this in Jesus’ Name, amen.

Hymn Come, ye thankful people, come by Henry Alford

https://youtu.be/5FqdCskC0QE?si=b205ErqThMMes0Hi

Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest home;

All is safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin.

God our Maker doth provide for our wants to be supplied;

Come to God's own temple, come, raise the song of harvest home.

All the world is God's own field, fruit as praise to God we yield;

Wheat and tares together sown are to joy or sorrow grown;

First the blade and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear;

Lord of harvest, grant that we wholesome grain and pure may be.

For the Lord our God shall come, and shall take the harvest home;

From the field shall in that day all offences purge away,

Giving angels charge at last in the fire the tares to cast;

But the fruitful ears to store in the garner evermore.

Even so, Lord, quickly come, bring Thy final harvest home;

Gather Thou Thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin,

There, forever purified, in Thy presence to abide;

Come, with all Thine angels, come, raise the glorious harvest home.

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 Ephesians 3:1-6

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles - assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Reflection

In the Bible there are many illustrations and accounts taken from what we could call today agriculture, or farming. One of the best-known examples is Jesus’ parable of the sower who through the seed on all kinds of different land, as you would if you were a farmer in First Century Palestine. Some seed landed on good soil, but much landed elsewhere – amongst weeds, on stony ground and so on. Only some of the seed turned into good crops to be harvested at the proper time. Jesus explained to His disciples that it is the same when the Gospel is preached – not everyone will respond and produce the fruit of repentance and salvation (Matthew 13:23).

Our Bible reading today does not seem to have any connection to agricultural life or practice, and yet I think that some of the very same principles that we see in Jesus’ parable of the sower are found here too. Paul was given a seed of kinds, grace, to sow amongst the believers in Ephesus, and in some of them this grew and germinated into unity and salvation in Christ Jesus. Yes, there is more to what Paul writes here, but it certainly does include the planting of the Gospel message, the watering of God’s grace and the harvest of salvation and entry into the Church. Above all else, I believe this is the key message that our celebration of Harvest should bring to mind.

Let’s now look at what Paul writes in more detail. Paul begins this section by reminding the Ephesians of the fact that he is currently in prison on account of the Gospel. In other words, he is facing persecution because he has been faithful to obey God rather than the rulers of this world. This is a brief reminder of where our Christian allegiance to Jesus first can get us, but we must not forget that God never leaves us nor forsakes us, even in the toughest of situations (remember Joseph languishing in prison in Egypt!). Notice also how Paul says that he is a prisoner for the sake of Gentile believers. He could have had an easier life by not obeying God’s call to preach to the Gentiles, but this was not an option for him!

In verses 2 and 3 Paul writes about what God had given to him for the sake of the Gentiles. In other words, God’s grace and the mystery of reconciliation between Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ was revealed to him for the benefit of others. Paul grew up as a Jew, received training to become a rabbi, and was a zealous persecutor of the early church. As such, Paul would have known the Scriptures, and even heard some Christian teaching, but he had not recognised that Jesus was the promised messiah. Yet, out of God’s mercy, and in an exceptional way, God revealed the truth of the Gospel to Paul through a special vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Paul is the only person in Scripture to learn the Gospel this way, and it is important that we understand that this is an exception, and a very unusual one at that. The normal means by which people have come to faith in Christ is through hearing it preached, and that is what we read about throughout the New Testament and church history. That brings us on to our calling as fellow believers in Jesus Christ, who have received the same grace and same Gospel. We, in turn, are to share that same Gospel with others, just as Paul did with the believers in Ephesus. However, we must also note that this is all the work of the Spirit – in other words the Holy Spirit is the One who will empower us and work in people’s minds and hearts to bring them to faith. We have a part to play, but without the Holy Spirit it would not be effective.

Paul also reminds us of how it was this same Holy Spirit of God who revealed the wondrous truths of God’s grace to the prophets and apostles. This points back to the solid foundation about which Paul wrote in chapter 2. Our faith is revealed to us by God, firstly from the Scriptures, and secondly through the work of the Spirit showing us that it is true. The Word of God and the Holy Spirit of God are both necessary and essential to the process of people coming to faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible is the seed that is scattered, and the Holy Spirit is the water that enables the seed to grow into eternal life. Let us continue to grow in faith, recognising God’s wonderful grace at work in us, and give Him the thanks and praise He deserves. Amen!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the truths that are planted in us through Your Word, and for the amazing mystery of grace that You have revealed to us through Paul. How truly wonderful it is that all who believe on Christ for salvation are to be part of Your body on Earth, the Church. You make us all ministers of reconciliation to a lost and dying world. Help us to be worthy of this beautiful calling, to share the Gospel with all those whom You choose to place before us. Through the work of Your Holy Spirit, and our obedient service, may You bring others to a harvest and inheritance of eternal life. This we ask in the Name of Your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ, amen.

Benediction

Heavenly Father, thank You that You have made each of us Your children, and members of Christ’s body, by faith in His finished work at Calvary. Send us out with thankfulness, to the praise of Your glorious Name, amen.