Home Service Sheet for Sunday 27th October 2024

Call to Worship  Habakkuk 3:17-19

Though the fig tree should not blossom,

    nor fruit be on the vines,

the produce of the olive fail

    and the fields yield no food,

the flock be cut off from the fold

    and there be no herd in the stalls,

yet I will rejoice in the Lord;

    I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

God, the Lord, is my strength;

    he makes my feet like the deer's;

    he makes me tread on my high places.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You and praise You this day for all that You have done and all that You are. In Your Word You have revealed Yourself to us, full of grace and truth. We thank You for the example of the prophet Habakkuk and for the truths that we can learn from the book that bears his name. We acknowledge before You, O Lord, that, like Israel, we have gone astray and wandered far from You. We have left our first love and been seduced by the ways of the world. Forgive us, Lord, and grant to us strength to resist temptation. Purify Your Church and restore to us the joy of our salvation. Keep us faithfully looking to Christ and living by faith, for You alone are our strength and our salvation. In Jesus’ Name we pray, amen.

Hymn  Lord, for the years by Timothy Dudley Smith

<https://youtu.be/Cd14v0e1RWU?si=ERThArAZnbi9sdRh>

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 of 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 when we disown and doubt him,

loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,

hungry and helpless, lost indeed without him:

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.

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 1:57-66

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, but his mother answered, “No; he shall be called John.” And they said to her, “None of your relatives is called by this name.” And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called. And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbours. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.

Reflection

We live in a time when many people say that you can be whatever you want! If children want to be a doctor or a solicitor then that’s fine, and schools will encourage them to go for it, regardless of whether they have the abilities or necessary skills to make a success of that career. Others say that if you want to identify as a cat or a wolf then that is fine too, going as far as to provide litter trays for essential bodily functions! Perhaps it’s no wonder that this world is in such a mess! What I think this all points to is a lack of wisdom and humility amongst far too many people today.

The Scriptures tell us, on the contrary, that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7). Proper reverence and respect for God, understanding our proper place in the created order helps us to make good decisions, and help others do the same. God is all powerful and He can do absolutely anything that is not contrary to His nature (God is holy and cannot sin, for example). Humanly speaking, the older couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth couldn’t have children due to their age and barrenness, but God gave them a child. It was His plan, and indeed the child would grow up to be significant in the history of God’s dealings with humanity.

Our reading today begins with a wonderful phrase in some Bible translations, “the time was fulfilled.” In other words, the birth of Elizabeth’s child happened when it did because this was God’s plan that He had set long ago. This should remind us that God is faithful in keeping all His promises that we find recorded in His Word. It also shows us that God’s timing is perfect. The birth of a child is almost always a joyous time, and certainly that was the case here. However, we should note what it was that folk were celebrating, and that was the great mercy (and grace) of God towards Elizabeth and Zechariah. The focus is not so much on the mother and child as it is on the One who enabled her to bear a son.

Our previous knowledge of Zechariah from earlier in Luke chapter 1 showed him to be a bit of a doubter. Even though an angel told him he was about to have a son he disbelieved and was struck mute because of this. However, in our reading today, we see that Zechariah has learnt his lesson. The naming of this child happens on the eighth day after his birth, and typically a family name would be used. Elizabeth, though, insists that he be called John, and those present want to double check this with Zechariah. He confirms this name that the angel gave him in writing and his tongue is then loosened and he can speak again! Through his obedience and faith Zechariah is restored and immediately speaks praise to God.

In a sense, Zechariah embodies the thoughts of the prophet Habakkuk, with which we began our time today. Despite all the bad things that had happened, God is worthy to be praised. For Zechariah he had simply been made mute, which in the grand scheme of things was not that bad. Habakkuk writes about failed crops and no animals for food, which over time would become a matter of life and death and yet he knows that he will praise the Lord. We must also learn this important lesson – even in the midst of pain, suffering and calamity God is worthy to be praised!

In verse 65 of our reading we are told that “fear came on all their neighbours.” What kind of fear was this? I would suggest that this was fear of the Lord, recognising what God had done and what God could do. Again, I think that there is an important lesson for us to learn from here. The proper response to God is one of reverence and awe. He is holy and almighty, whereas we are weak and powerless sinners, completely reliant upon His grace and mercy. There is nothing about us that can make us right with God, only what God has done for us in and through His Son, Jesus Christ. This reverence causes people to ask, “What then will this child be?”

We are here talking about John, and of course we will learn all about the ministry that God gave him as we continue to study Luke’s Gospel together. Yet, even here there is a timely reminder that the child will be special not because of his own abilities or strength, but rather because “the hand of the Lord was with him.” (v.66) In our own lives, we must remember our proper place before God and our reliance upon the Lord. Yet, because God is with us and His Holy Spirit dwells within us, we can be used by God to do good things in this world. We can proclaim the Gospel and do good works that bring glory to God! May that be our aim in this life. Amen!

Prayer of intercession

Almighty God, for whom all things are possible, help us to remember the wondrous things that You have done for Your people through the ages and for us today. We thank You for Your Word and the way in which Your Holy Spirit helps us to understand it and apply it in our lives day by day. Thank You for the many insights we gain from the lives of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and the birth of John. Thank You also for Zechariah’s lovely testimony to Your faithfulness and grace. Help each of us to live by faith and not by sight. May we not doubt Your precious promises that You have given us in Your Word, we pray in the Name of Your Son, our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Prayer of Blessing

May the love of the Father, the tenderness of the Son, and the presence of the Holy Spirit, gladden our hearts and bring peace to our souls, this day and forevermore, amen.