**Home Service Sheet for Sunday 8th September 2024**

**Call to Worship**                   **Psalm 46:1-3**

God is our refuge and strength,  
    a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,  
    though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,  
though its waters roar and foam,  
    though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

**Prayer**

Almighty God, the One who has promised to be the solid foundation and refuge for Your people throughout the ages, we give You praise today! For the wonderful beauty of Your creation and for the love of family and friends we give You thanks. You alone are worthy to receive glory, honour, and praise, O Lord! Help us now to worship You as You desire, by Your Spirit and in truth. Aid us in our listening to Your Word and in our applying it to our lives. In everything may we seek Your glory! Amen.

**Hymn**                                     **God is our strength and refuge**by ***Richard Bewes***

<https://youtu.be/bA0zJnW1Rr8?si=-gThtpzHdmuCVDYm>

God is our strength and refuge, our present help in trouble,  
And we therefore will not fear, though the earth should change!  
Though mountains shake and tremble, though swirling floods are raging,  
God the Lord of hosts is with us evermore!

There is a flowing river within God's holy city;  
God is in the midst of her- she shall not be moved!  
God's help is swiftly given, thrones vanish at His presence -  
God the Lord of hosts is with us evermore!

Come, see the works of our Maker, learn of His deeds all-powerful:  
Wars will cease across the world when He shatters the spear!  
Be still and know your Creator, uplift Him in the nations -  
God the Lord of hosts is with us evermore!

**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                     Joel 3:9-16**

Proclaim this among the nations:  
Consecrate for war;  
    stir up the mighty men.  
Let all the men of war draw near;  
    let them come up.  
Beat your plowshares into swords,  
    and your pruning hooks into spears;  
    let the weak say, “I am a warrior.”

Hasten and come,  
    all you surrounding nations,  
    and gather yourselves there.  
Bring down your warriors, O Lord.  
Let the nations stir themselves up  
    and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat;  
for there I will sit to judge  
    all the surrounding nations.

Put in the sickle,  
    for the harvest is ripe.  
Go in, tread,  
    for the winepress is full.  
The vats overflow,  
    for their evil is great.

Multitudes, multitudes,  
    in the valley of decision!  
For the day of the Lord is near  
    in the valley of decision.  
The sun and the moon are darkened,  
    and the stars withdraw their shining.

The Lord roars from Zion,  
    and utters his voice from Jerusalem,  
    and the heavens and the earth quake.  
But the Lord is a refuge to his people,  
    a stronghold to the people of Israel.

**Reflection**

God has spoken to and through the prophet Joel. Earlier in the book that bears his name, there have been messages of judgment upon Israel, alongside a call to repent. The foreign nations that God has used to bring about judgment will themselves be judged and God’s people will be restored. In verse 9 of our reading today, we read, “Consecrate for war; stir up the mighty men. Let all the men of war draw near; let them come up.” Taken at face value, this sounds as though God is once again calling these nations to battle. However, this time, God is setting them up for their great downfall and destruction. Who can stand against the Lord? The Psalms tell us that only the One who is pure can stand before God (Psalm 24:1), and only Jesus is perfect and holy.

Verse 10 takes the hope filled words of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 2:3-4), and reverses them. The swords that Isaiah proclaimed were to be made into ploughshares are now to be swords again in the hands of pagans. In a sense, God, is poking fun at those who oppose Him. These pagan nations may as well be bringing blades of grass to battle for all the good literal swords and spears will do them in the valley of Jehoshaphat! In fact, God’s perfect future that He has prepared for His people will not require swords and spears. These things belong to this present, imperfect time before Jesus returns and renews all things.

Those who oppose God will come to the valley of decision, and there they will be judged by the Lord Almighty. All peoples from all the different nations, tribes and languages will come before the Lord and be judged. For many this will be a time for fear and trembling, but for those who have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, this will be the time at which they will enter into the fullness of God’s Kingdom and receive their reward. It is interesting to note that the valley is described as the ‘valley of decision’ in verse 14. This may initially suggest that it is the decision of human beings to chose whose side they are on, but as we read on it quickly becomes apparent that God is the One making the decisions about the people who are before Him.

Verse 14 also speaks of the multitudes who will come to that valley of judgment. This prophecy has certainly not been fulfilled yet. It probably points forward to the final judgment of God at the end of time, and yet it is described as being ‘near’. I think we always need to be cautious about such timed language, though, as Scripture tells us about God’s views of time in the following way. “But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” (2 Peter 3:8-9)

So, although God’s judgment is near, God is also merciful and gracious. He is slow to anger and abounding in loving kindness. It is because of His mercy that Jesus has not yet returned to judge all peoples. Peter expresses God’s purpose in delaying and that is the salvation of sinners. Even as we hear and read about God’s judgment, we are reminded of His love and mercy for all people. Joel also speaks about signs in the heavens and on the earth, in language that would be echoed by the Lord Jesus during His earthly ministry (Matthew 24:29), and by the apostle John in the book of Revelation. There will be signs before the end, but nonetheless no-one except God the Father knows when the Son will return in glory.

The final sentence of our reading today, though, is one of great encouragement for all who are in Christ Jesus. They are words that echo the Psalm with which we began. Joel writes, “the Lord is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel.” These are truly relevant words for God’s people today. In many places, God’s people face opposition, ridicule and persecution because of their faith in Christ. Regardless of what is happening in the world, God is still sat on His throne, in control of all things. The apostle Paul knew what it was like to be arrested, persecuted and shipwrecked because of his faith in Christ, and yet he continued to look to the goodness of God to uphold him through it all. So too, we should look to the loving kindness of God and the mercy found in His Son to sustain us. Truly, God is our strength and refuge, an ever-present help in times of trouble. Amen!

**Prayer of intercession**

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your grace, mercy, and loving kindness that You have revealed to us through Your Word and in Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Loving God, we pray that You would give us Your perspective on the multitudes around us in the ‘valley of decision’ today, and help us to live accordingly, with urgency. We pray for the multitudes of people around the world who are unreached by Your glorious Gospel. Empower and enable Your Church to proclaim the good news of Jesus boldly and clearly. Send more labourers into the harvest fields, we pray, that the Gospel would spread to all the peoples of the world, that the multitudes in the valley of decision might know of Your salvation and receive Your love in Christ. This we ask in His Name, amen.

**Prayer of Blessing**

Gracious God, send us out today in the power of Your Holy Spirit, filled with Your love for those who do not yet know You. Grant us strength, courage, and boldness to speak the truth and bring You glory! Amen.