

Trinity 20 Sunday 25th October 2020

25 th October Bible Sunday Trinity 20	9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton 11.00 Holy Communion Halling	Nehemiah 8 vv 1-12 p492 Colossians 3 vv 12-17 p1187 Matthew 24 vv 30-35 p993
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O ALMIGHTY and most merciful God, of thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech thee, from all things that may hurt us; that we, being ready both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things that though wouldest have done; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The joy of the LORD is your strength.

The people of Israel had returned from their captivity in Babylon to the Holy Land. They had made secure the Holy City, rebuilding its walls. They had begun again to offer the daily sacrifices and they were in the process of rebuilding the Temple. They assembled together to hear the Word of the LORD, the Law which God had given to Moses on Mt Sinai many centuries earlier, when their forefathers were set free from slavery in Egypt, and they were at the start of their journey to the Promised Land, the land which God had promised to their ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Israel. Their return from Babylonian exile and the restoration of the Temple and the rebuilding of Jerusalem constituted a new beginning, a fresh start. So why did they weep when they heard the Law read to them? People weep for different reasons. Some cry at weddings as well as funerals. Tears may be a response to all kinds of powerful emotions. So why did the Jews weep when they heard the Word of the LORD read to them as they stood free men and women in the streets of the Holy City which they were even then in the process of rebuilding?

Nehemiah and Ezra told them that they should not be sorrowful. There were reasons why they might be. The consistent teaching of the Bible is that the reason for the Exile was that they and their ancestors, time after time, had disobeyed the Law of God. They had worshipped false gods, formed alliances with pagans, engaged in violence, acted dishonestly in business, and, far from caring for the poor as they ought to have done, they had oppressed the widow, the orphan and the stranger. The disaster of the fall of the Holy City and the destruction of the Temple was something which they had brought upon themselves.

Moreover, when they heard the Law read to them, if they listened attentively and with an open mind, they would have realised that they still fell far short of God's standards. None of us, except Jesus, has ever lived a perfect human life. None of us therefore has the right to stand in the Presence of God. There is a proper spirit of repentance for our failure to love God with all our hearts and our neighbours as ourselves.

However, as the psalm says, *The Lord is gracious, his mercy is everlasting: and his truth endureth from generation to generation.* God forgives our folly and our sin. The initiative is His. God sets us free. He restores us to His favour. He empowers us to start again, to rebuild our lives, to reconstruct them. Jesus brings us joy. Paul tells us to rejoice in the Lord always. Nehemiah reminds us *The joy of the LORD is your strength.*

Listen to these lovely words which Jesus spoke to His disciples and, through them to us, at His Last Supper, on the night before He died. John: 15 ⁹ *As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.* ¹⁰ *If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.* ¹¹ *These*

things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.¹² This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.¹³ Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

The joy of the LORD is your strength. How do these words help us as we confront the current crisis? We might feel that there is not much joy in the news. Very often, there is not. There always seem to be terrible things going on in the world. Now the news is dominated by COVID. In our Gospel reading, Jesus says that all the tribes of the earth shall mourn at His coming. They will mourn because they have rejected Him and His love. People have acted with hatred in their hearts. They have been indifferent to the needs of others and the well-being of God's Creation. They have worshipped the false gods of gold and silver, the work of human hands. Paradoxically, they have neglected their own well-being in selfishly pursuing their own personal goals instead of selflessly seeking to serve God and our fellow human-beings. *For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? The tribes of the earth shall mourn,* says Jesus. Where's the joy? *So likewise ye,* He says, *when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors. Verily, I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.* Who are these ye, the people who should rejoice at the coming of the Lord? The tribes of the earth mourn, but ye as (as S Luke reports Jesus saying) *When these things come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.* Trust God. If we know Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, there is nothing to fear. Through faith & hope & love in Him we have joy in His abundance.

The joy of the LORD is your strength. How can we experience that joy? Can we be joyful when there is so much in the world to worry about, even to be afraid of? It is a matter of living in Christ. It is walking worthy of our vocation as Christians. It is in keeping God's perfect holy law of love in our everyday lives, of obeying His commandments. It is walking each day with God. Forgive me for repeating our NT lesson, but in it S Paul so perfectly summarises what it is to be a Christian, how it is that we may experience the joy of the Lord in our everyday lives and forever with Him in Heaven. ¹² *Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering;* ¹³ *Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.* ¹⁴ *And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.* ¹⁵ *And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.* ¹⁶ *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.* ¹⁷ *And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.*

The Gospel draws a distinction between what all this means for the tribes of the earth and what it means for us Christians, mourning on their part, joy on ours. But, it's not left there. Read on to the end of the Gospel & the Great Commission. Jesus is good news for all the nations. Our task is to preach and teach Jesus, to share the joy, so that all people everywhere have the opportunity to turn to Him and in Him to find their peace and health, what Christians call salvation.