

Call to worship: Psalm 113

Opening Prayer:

Our Father God, we are come into your presence this morning, to offer you our worship; to offer you our praises in thankfulness for all you have done for us. Father take away all that would distract us from worshipping you in Spirit and in truth; quieten our minds, so that we can focus entirely on you and know that you are ever present in every part of our lives; and that we can depend on you to hear us as we make our request in and through the wonderful name of Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen

Hymn: Summer suns are glowing

Introduction Abraham's faith tested – From Genesis 22

Last week we spent some time reflecting on the Covenant – the Promise God made with Abraham that bound God's chosen people to him for ever. We read the Scriptures from the Old Testament about Abraham trusting God to keep his promises and of God counting Abraham as righteous because Abraham believed God, upped sticks and went wherever God sent him, without asking 'why or what for.' Abraham's trust in God led him into a very precarious position. Let me tell you about the time when Abraham was tested:

Without looking at your Bibles, can you tell me the sequence of events relating to the time when God called Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac?

- Go to Moriah
- Backed his bags, loaded his donkey with all he needed to make a sacrifice and set off
- Saw the place where he was to make the sacrifice,
- Unloaded the donkey and then set off with Isaac.
- Isaac asked Abraham about the animal to be sacrificed – Abraham replied – God will provide.
- Arrived at the place of sacrifice, Abraham built the altar, bound up Isaac and laid him on it and was preparing to sacrifice him.
- Angel appeared and instructed Abraham not to harm the boy saying, *"do not harm the boy, I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."*
- Abraham saw the ram tangled in the thicket and sacrificed it and named the place 'God will provide'

Abraham was obedient to God, because God had made a promise about him being the father of all nations, and in knowing that God had granted him a son for the very purpose. As we shall hear from our readings this morning, faith in God pre-empted the Law that became a necessity causing God to put the Law into being so that all people going forward would have a hope and a future with him.

Hymn: All my hope in God is founded

Prayers and Lord's Prayer

Heavenly Father, Creator of all that was, is and will be, we praise you. We praise you for the love which you continually show us as you sustain and remake all you have created. We praise you for your love of us and for sending Jesus your Son our Saviour into the world to show us how to live to love as he lived amongst us showing us your love in action. We praise you too for the joy we share in knowing that you are ever present in our lives; that you have a plan for each of us till our

lives end; that plan includes your encouragement, provision and protection and we pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit at work within us you will transform our words and actions done in your name so that they bring you glory.

Father, we thank you for the fellowship of your church around the world, the community of those who have confessed their sin and are receiving your promise of life made whole. Thank you for every person who shares your love with us and for every person who demonstrate the reality of the love of Jesus in all they say and do. Thank you for those who have been our help when we needed it during those days when we have felt despair. Thank you for every person whose offer of forgiveness has set us free to begin again and has been a sign to us of your love, a love which is always reaching out to us in Christ. Heavenly Father, we thank you for being ready to forgive us whenever we turn to you and honestly acknowledge your power and our own need.

We give you thanks and praise you for the joy of knowing that even though we don't always live up to the example Jesus has set for us, we can experience the joy of forgiveness and beginning again with you. Lord, you have made us for freedom and responsibility. But we allow ourselves to be controlled by other people's ideas and opinions. So often our lives are governed by our wants and not by our necessities. We allow decisions to be made for us. The world is governed by impersonal forces and unfeeling, unthinking machines control our lives. We allow life to simply drift by. We confess that we trust our own judgement and long for the approval of others. We confess that each day we seek our own satisfaction, and our self-centredness hurts you and we hurt each other. Father forgive us for all those things we do that we shouldn't; help us to do those things that will please you and build your kingdom. Father grant to us your strength, courage and determination to stand for what we know is real, true and of you. Enable us to live boldly, daring to love and be loved, knowing that we are, by faith, your sons and daughters, cleansed and renewed by Jesus Christ our Saviour and Friend, in his name we pray. Amen

Lord's Prayer

Reflection: Faith came before Law

So, Abraham had faith in God; as did Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Joshua and the rest...

If you remember, last week we read about how Paul in his letter reiterated God's call to obedience found in the Old Testament, obedience that would be the means of the entire nation entering the Promised Land.

Not only did Moses receive the tablets of stone bearing the 10 Commandments, God commissioned him to call the whole nation to obedience before they set out: Listen to that commandment:

Reading: Deuteronomy 6 vv 1 – 9

Yes, they did up sticks and move on, but, again disobedience got in the way and the whole tribe spent 40 years wandering around until the older generations died off and the young generation learnt to have faith in God who always keeps his promises. And even though they did do as God required for a time they soon lost it and fell back into their disobedient selves again and then as we learnt last week, God changed his Covenant. As I said, in writing his letter to the churches in Galatia, the Apostle Paul emphasised the point that God sent Jesus into the world to remind all his people that God not only loved them he had prepared a sacrifice for them in Jesus Christ his one and only son, so that they and all who believed in him, had faith in him would be saved.

It was to this gospel message of God's love for all – Jew and Gentile, man, woman slave or free Paul's faith depended on God, he defended his faith and readily called all believers to do the same. Like all Jews, the Shema would have been whispered in his hear at his birth, Paul grew up with it, it marked his faith journey; faith came before the Law. Even though he didn't know it, as

a trainee Pharisee Paul's faith was God inspired; it was part of his DNA as God moulded him to be the person God wanted him to be – to speak out for Christ's sake and to bring salvation to all. For we know from Scripture that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

It was only after Paul had completed his training as a Pharisee and had taken up his position as a prosecutor of Christians and he met Jesus on the road did the penny drop for him; that moment when he could look back and see God's hand on his life; making him ready for when he received his commissioning. In every letter Paul wrote, he tells every reader of his life story, he leaves nothing out, so this first compelling letter to those early Christians he was able to speak from the heart and from his own experience about why faith in God comes first and that every prophetic word spoken about God's love, grace, mercy, and salvation point to Jesus Christ.

Hymn: Great is Thy faithfulness

Reflection: Law points to Jesus, the Saviour of all

It is a fact that some of us don't read the scriptures so often because we say the words on the page are confusing; some say that the words contradict other passages; some believe people who have never read the scriptures but call the Bible a book of fairy tales; some say that they just don't understand, so they don't read the Bible that Christians call the inspired word of God. Yes, I suppose reading the Bible by piecemeal; or by always reading the same few chapters, may not be the best way to read the Bible; but the Apostle John suggests to every reader (you and me) that we claim the presence of the Holy Spirit to help us to understand what God may be saying to us through his Word. Today is one of those moments, as we read the next section of our reflection of the letter. Why? Well because in the next ten verses of Paul's letter to the Galatians we are faced with one of Paul's conundrums.

Reading: Galatians 3 vv 15 – 25

Did you notice:

- Paul is still talking about that initial promise God made to Abraham, a promise that has no time limit; wasn't just for Abraham alone; but for every one, as one way or another we are all connected. Whereas Jews back in the day, as now can trace their ancestry back to Abraham, we probably can't – but we who have faith are connected – because of the promise through Abraham's seed.
- Paul identifies the SEED to be Jesus (remember he was present with God at creation) and here God identifies part of the Us at creation to be the Seed of the future.
- Whilst many a Jew gave up on God acting for them, being a Pharisaic Jew, Paul knew that God works to his own timing, and states here the exact time it took for God to fulfil his promise in sending Jesus.
- Then Paul explains the conundrum about the why and the what for, for the new covenant in Jesus. Here Paul gives his readers a clear message of why the Law still mattered, but not to the same extent as it did to the Jews as faith in Jesus Christ is paramount. The Law – The Ten Commandments were put in place because of people's disobedience, self-centredness and a total disregard of the less fortunate. As I said last week, Paul was acutely aware of the fact that Jews had a sort of ledger of good deeds in the hope that the sum total would be sufficient to gain them a place with God. Paul's answer is simple, for a Jew good deeds, sticking to the Law in its entirety is an impossibility; and as Jeremiah stated, a Jew can no longer depend on the Law only on God's love, grace and mercy made possible through the Messiah.

- But Paul doesn't leave it at that, I think that he is convinced that those Jewish Christian in the Galatian churches who had heard the gospel and had respond to it, had realised that their past adherence to the law had not served them well at all. In fact on hearing the gospel of salvation through Jesus had highlighted their disobedience to the Law and caused them believe in Jesus and to seek God's love, grace and mercy and begin a new relationship with him. So I think Paul argues with himself about their change of heart and their wanting to go back to the old ways. I have the idea that as he wrote, Paul underlined the points about faith and how faith in Jesus, and the hope Jesus gives and the promises he makes matter, as he implores the Christians to stick with Jesus.

Why? Well because God keeps his promises. As I said earlier, for love of us, God's promise made to Abraham has no time limit, and is for all who puts their trust in God, their faith in Jesus, the Saviour of the world. As Christians, the promise is our birth right, our inheritance, our hope of spending eternity with Christ:

Read: Galatians 3 vv 26 to 4 v 7

Notice the repetition of what Paul wrote at the beginning of this letter about every member of the church are brothers and sisters in Christ, because they have put on Christ at their baptism and when they received the Holy Spirit . Here in these verses Paul qualifies their public testimony linking it back to God's promise to Abraham fulfilled in Jesus, whom God sent into the world to save it. Christ lived, died once for all – slave, free, man, women Jew or Gentile – Jesus was raised to life and lives for ever more. In doing so Paul also reminded his readers of the sensibilities that surrounded a Jewish family, and of the laws and rights of the children especially the eldest son. Having started this part of his letter determined to convince his readers that whilst the Law identifies right from wrong cannot be ignored, he ends the paragraph in a softer tone suggesting that all who have put on Christ through baptism and in receiving the Holy Spirit and have faith in him, all who trust God can call God Abba Father, as Jesus taught his disciples to do. As we shall see over the next couple of weeks, Paul questions the faith and commitment of the Jewish Christians. I wonder how we would respond if we had to respond to a question about our faith, would we be satisfied in our defence of the gospel or found wanting.

I think that today as we struggle to understand the scriptures and to apply the commands to our lives, we have to accept that all that is written is the inspired word of God, *"it is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword; it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart....Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."* More importantly though, the words on the page remind us that God loves us and sent Jesus to save us. For he has the words of Eternal life! This is our salvation and our hope for all our tomorrows, because it is the promise Jesus has made.

Hymn: Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine

Prayers Intercession:

Lord, we pray today for the world, and acknowledge again that you made it to bring you glory; out of your creative love and compassion you made it to be a place of beauty and nourishment to every kind of living thing. Over the past week we have heard of the need for us seek and work for peace in our world that is at war; as believers in equality and justice we are called to protect the earth and its resources so that no one goes hungry; no one is surrounded by devastating deserts, floods and fires; no one is homeless or cannot access medical care. But the plea for equity and equality has been drowned by the demand not for love for one another, but for the selfish law of first come first served, the law that relates to the most powerful taking the cream

leaving the dregs for the less fortunate. Lord God, in these unequal days, may our souls, our lives reflect your ways: putting you first in all things, the needs of our neighbour second and ourselves last.

Father, we pray for our community here in Pudsey where friendship and neighbourliness was a given; we pray for all the organisations that are at work in our town working hard to ensure that those bonds of friendship do not disappear due to the anxiety caused by financial uncertainty. The peace of our town has been shattered by the number of hate, knife and drug induced crimes; so we pray for our community where people once felt safe and secure; for the police and other agencies that work to keep our streets safe. We pray for social services and other organisation who care for those in our nursing homes, and residential care homes. We pray too for our community where people suffer in isolation and even die all alone; where people are afraid to help others because compassion has been replaced by personal self-centred concern.

We pray for each church community that was once the centre of most people's lives and where many came to a living faith in Christ. We pray for a church which knew what it believed, declared its faith and lived a life based on the commands found in the scriptures, accepting them as right and true but have lost sight of the one who comes to save. In these changing times Lord, where once faithful servants readily worshipped only you, they now have put other things at the centre of their lives and you do not feature in how they live. So we pray for your continuing loving guidance that is needed to meet the challenges that each church congregation and community is facing in these uncertain times. Father, may we acknowledge and live out our role to be gospel messengers, changing the law of self – first to the law of love and Christ like friendship.

We pray for our homes and our wider families as our thoughts turn to the coming of summer holidays and the plans people will begin to make arrangements to take time out of their normal schedule to relax and recharge their batteries. We pray for those homes that are under pressure at this time; for those that are at the point of breaking; for those who cannot see any hope, only despair and bitterness. We pray for our own homes and loved ones; may Christ be the head of each household and our hearts; may our love for him be genuine and lived out to your glory.

Our Father, we pray today for our friends Chee, Ping and Casper and ask that you will be their strength and shield as they continue to work with you and for you in the various communities to which you have sent them. We pray too for our dedicated organist who celebrates her birthday next Saturday, and ask that you will be close to her and help her to recover so that she can continue to do those things she enjoys doing. We pray too for those we know and don't know who own or work in the businesses on the left hand side of Lidget Hill and Richardshaw Lane, and ask your blessing on all those who create equipment, cook and serve or provide nail and hairdressing services to the people of Pudsey. We pray for those who we know who are in need of our prayers: *(Make your prayers known to God)*

We pray for ourselves and for all those things that worry us, the responsibilities that weigh us down and the experiences of rejection, failure and sorrow that all but overwhelm us. We remember with gratitude those times when we received unexpected care and support that enabled us to begin again, and that sense of being accepted, which rekindled our hope and dignity. May Christ's law of loving our neighbour as ourselves rule our hearts and lives. IN the name of Jesus Christ we pray. amen

Hymn: We have heard a joyful sound

Blessing: Lord you have called us to live to love, send us out from this place to keep your commandment as we serve you each day, and bless us as we do all that pleases you. And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit go with us, today and every day. Amen