

Prisoners Week 2020

Thanks to the Rev Donald Scott for taking the lectionary readings and using them to reflect on the Prisoners Week theme of 'Not Alone' for the Church of Scotland Weekly Worship.

Resources for children can also be found by following the link:

https://churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/69900/15-November_24-after-Pentecost_Prisoners-Week.pdf

Introduction

November is a season of remembrance and this Sunday offers the opportunity to remember those in prison. During the lockdown prison staff, including some Chaplains, continued to serve the needs of what is often a highly vulnerable and volatile group of people, gathered together without social distancing from often the very communities on the margins of society where the virus took a firm grip.

This Prisoners Week the theme “Not Alone” has been chosen to help congregations and others to think and imagine what it might be like to spend time in the facilities throughout the country where people are held.

Our thinking and imagining might lead to questions about why prison is used as it is, and whether there might be other more successful ways of keeping society safe, and rehabilitating offenders.

Headlines would suggest that overcrowding in prisons might make the theme a little redundant! However, when cell doors shut and lock and prisoners are left with their own thoughts and no access to phones to gain support from family and loved ones. prison can feel a very lonely place indeed.

We are reminded of the verse, “Lo. I am with you.” In the midst of isolation. doubt, self-loathing, anger and recrimination God is with each and every one of us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God!

Scripture overview:

Judges 4 vs1-7:

The book of Judges probably comes to us as a series of songs, poems and stories about the history of Israel and the “heroes of the faith”, known as the judges, one of whom is Deborah the Prophetess. Lovers of Marvel comics may be surprised to see similarities here! Very little is known about Deborah, and here her role is to motivate Barak to attack a much stronger force against a “super-enemy”, Sisera.

Barak wins the day against the odds.

The next two verses after the lectionary reading are interesting in revealing Deborah’s role and the position of women in ancient Hebrew society!

There are echoes of Gideon giving up numerical superiority in battle to prove Jachweh’s superiority and certainly the story lends itself to consideration of what can be achieved with God’s help.

Psalm 123

The theme of turning to God for succour, support and mercy also runs through Psalm 123. The setting is probably post-exilic and it is a psalm of lament, put into the mouth of a pilgrim smarting under the insults and derision of foreign oppressors.

It is a psalm crying out for recognition and the return of justice to a land ruled by oppressors, "stuffed with contempt".

The petitioner compares his life to that of a slave, looking for some sign of favour from an all-powerful master. It is a powerful psalm which looks for justice, but sees none. There is a sense of resignation and powerlessness, but also dependence on a God who will surely listen to his people as in Egypt. In the Christian tradition, we would echo, "Marantha! Come Lord, quickly come."

Zephaniah Ch1 vs7,12-18

Looking for justice is also a theme within the Zephaniah alternative lesson. Zephaniah appears to have been part of the royal court, and maybe even the royal family, whose criticism of society's ills are all the more powerful for that fact. "The day is soon coming" picks up on imagery from Isaiah 2 and Amos 5. God will come to judge his people, and those who are greedy, complacent and refuse to believe that God cares had better watch out! The imagery of the message is of a terrible and wrathful judgement on the wicked, which will be swifter than a champion runner and will wreak unavoidable destruction and desolation. There will be no bribe or ransom, no second chance, no exception or exemption. The phrase Old Testament "pit dangling" comes to mind! However, although the lectionary leaves us dangling, neither Zephaniah nor the gospel leaves us without hope!

Psalm 90 vs1-8,12

In a similar vein to Zephaniah and psalm 123, Psalm 90 is another community lament, urging people to accept their fate.

Beginning with praise for the One who created time and space, it ends with a plea for pity. Wisdom lies in accepting our fate and recognising we can never live up to God's standards. The best we can hope to achieve is understanding our limitations before the One who is beyond time and space.

1 Thessalonians 4 vs 13-18

The nihilism of Psalm 90 is a good counterpoint to the teachings of Paul, encouraging the young church in Thessalonika. The lectionary passage could be described as the hallmark of the letter, which is hope in the resurrection of Jesus. The early church were puzzled about the status of people who died before Jesus returned. Had they forfeited their salvation? Some may also have believed that baptism into the death and resurrection gave them immunity from death-rendered them immortal as in the rites of the mystery religions. The thrust and purpose of Paul's response is to make clear the inseparable relationship between the Christian and Christ. The passage then spends a considerable amount of time speculating on the eschaton, or The End. He then goes on to remind the readers that his intent is not to give a preview of the future, but a basis for faith and security when faced with death-not a blow by blow account of the end times, but a source of encouragement that we are all in God's hands.

Matthew 25 vs 14-30

The gospel lesson is an antidote for those who might have wished to sit around just waiting for Christ's return! The parable of the three servants makes it clear that God expects us to use what we have in service of the kingdom. The three servants might have different talents, but they are expected to use them fruitfully and not waste that which has been entrusted to them.

Matthew uses several parables in this passage about the need for watchfulness. They may well have originated at a time when the early church had begun to lose some keenness in waiting for the return of Jesus. Perhaps there was a laxness creeping in or even exploitation of power and authority within the fellowships. The parables serve as a warning to be prepared!

Sermon ideas

There are several themes which might suggest themselves from these passages.

Preparedness: Prison is a time of waiting. One of the old saws oft quoted to prisoners struggling with a sentence is, "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime."

Prisoners are encouraged to prepare for release, mentally, physically and spiritually.

How do we prepare for life with Christ? Using the Matthew and/or Thessalonians passages a number of avenues might present themselves, reminding people that we are "Not Alone", but supported by fellowship in and with Christ.

Justice: The longing for God to bring justice into situations where it is absent is a common theme in our OT lessons. This could lead to an exploration of our own relationship with justice and whether we seek and pursue it in our lives. Again, the apparent absence of justice in various situations could be held against our faith that we are "Not Alone." God will act and not leave us bereft.

Living with isolation: Using the OT passages to examine issues of dislocation and exclusion.

The lockdown in Spring forced many to confront issues of personal loneliness and ask questions about where we get our strength and support. The theme of "Not Alone" could be explored through sharing personal stories of God's presence in the midst of loss of community. This in turn could lead to an examination of how we use prison in society, and what that experience of being separate means for prisoners and their families.

Against all odds: There are many stories of personal faith being found in prison in the most unlikely of people and circumstances. Some people may be willing to come and share their stories, or it may be that online resources can be found which tell their tales. Finding hope in Christ despite some very bleak situations can be a profound demonstration of God's power against the odds, and the fact that no matter what has happened we are "Not Alone" in Him.

Prayers

Approach, confession and supplication

God of all time and space,

You were with your people of old.

You are with us now.

You have promised to be with us until the end of time.

We give you thanks that in your presence we are not alone.
Your love has held us from seed to personhood.
Your grace has infiltrated our lives, never letting us go
Your hope leads us on, encouraging us to find you in ever new and ever surprising ways.

We confess that sometimes we lose faith and trust.
We look at our lives and our world and don't like what we see.
We are impatient, ungrateful and angry.
There doesn't seem to be a clear plan.
Our ideas come unstuck and we question if there is any purpose to anything.

In this time of worship, remind us of your promise never to leave us or forsake us.
Help us to trust your promise that you will be with us.
Teach us again about the power and folly of your love.

We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.

Thanksgiving and Intercession

Loving Lord,
We give what we have.
We bring who we are.
Knowing that it can never be perfect and never enough.
Yet.
We bring our talents. The gifts you have given us
The people you have made us.
Knowing that you accept us and love us.

Use our lives and our living to build your people.
Use your people to build a better world
Use this world to show the beauty of life with you.

When we get complacent or downhearted teach us to count our blessings
When we count our blessings, teach us to pray for those who need your blessing.

Today we pray for those held in prison.
We pray for changed hearts for those who need to give up hate and hurt.
We pray for justice for those held for their opposition to wrongful abuse of power
We pray for new love where guilt and anger has soured relationships.

We pray for those who work in prison.
We give thanks for commitment to making things better
We give thanks for dedication to carrying out thankless and difficult jobs
We give thanks for skilful use of talents to rebuild shattered lives.

We pray for those who make decisions about how we use prison.

Bless those entrusted with decisions about justice and how it is enacted.
We pray for politicians, advisors, judges, and lawyers.
We ask a blessing on community and charity workers striving to improve lives on the margins.
We pray for the media that they might ask questions about how our communities do justice and not seek vengeance and incite hatred.
We pray for ourselves, that we might seek justice and pursue it.

A time to bring community concerns.

Now gathered together as the community of God's people, not alone, but united we say....
Our Father...

Benediction

You are not alone.
Go into the world,
surrounded by God's love,
supported by God's people
and strengthen by the knowledge that God will be with us.

May the love of the Creator, the Saviour and the Spirit
Sustain you today and always. Amen.

Suggestions for hymns: (all CH4)

54 Lord You have always been our home. Two settings of Psalm 90, reminding us of God's care and our frailty

118 Womb of life and source of being. A lovely Trinitarian hymn which uses imagery of God our home and the source of our being.

168 God weeps at love withheld. A confessional hymn, yearning for justice which would complement the Zephaniah passage well

263 God of Freedom, God of Justice. Possibly the most suitable hymn in the hymn book for Prisoners' Week!

264 Judge Eternal, throned in splendour. Compliments the idea of yearning for justice in the Old Testament passages

479 View the present through the promise. Fits well with the reading from Thessalonians 4

518 Lift up your hearts! Compliments the parable of the three servants with its imagery of gifts given and blessed

566 When I receive the peace of Christ my loneliness will end. Uses the theme of being alone and ending loneliness in Christ

736 Give thanks for life. Picks up on the themes of resurrection in Christ in the Thessalonians passage

805 Your will be done on earth. Can be used as a response during the intercessions