



The Tree of Life - 17th May 2020

Transcript

Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him.

Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.

Sing to him a new song; play skilfully, and shout for joy.

For the word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.

The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.

Hello everyone. These are words from Psalm 33, and encourage us to praise our God. So let's just do that with a song: the words of which based on that Psalm, set to a familiar tune. Joyfully sing in praise to your maker. There's no vocal on this recording, but I'm sure you won't have any trouble singing along.

Song: Joyfully Sing In Praise To Your Maker.

*Joyfully sing in praise to your Maker,
lift up his name on wings of your song,
You are called holy, child of his mercy,
called to be righteous, called to belong.*

*Sing him a new song, play to your Maker,
tuning your voice to notes in his praise,
Living your life in time to his rhythm,
giving him worship in every phrase.*

*Creator Spirit, Maker of all things,
composing life in true harmony
All the world moves to the beat of creation,
conductor of the great symphony.*

*Lend to our worship your Holy Spirit,
Breathe through our minds your power and your peace,
In you our hope finds promise unending,
your love song to us will never cease.*

Clare Stainsby

Let us pray

Loving Lord, we join our voices with this whole world in praise of you,
Our Creator and our Sustainer, Our Teacher and our Saviour,

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Our Companion and our Inspiration.

We lift our voices in song, we offer notes in praise of you.

We respond to the heart beat of your love in the life of this world.

Lord of all sound, Lord of patterns and rhythms,

We find you in the passion and the peace of music,

In the form and elegance of the art of sound,

In the soaring of melody, in the vibrant excitement of the beat.

In the perfect harmony of balanced voices and instruments.

We praise you with our voices and with our minds and with our hearts.

We receive from you through our senses

and through the power of your Spirit at work in our lives.

Lord of sound and of silent, of noise and of peace.

We are glad to meet with each other and with you this day.

And are ready to listen for your voice, ready to know your touch, ready to receive your love.

We offer this time of worship to you, in the name of Jesus. Amen

We share together in the Lord's Prayer

Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your Name,

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,

Now and forever. Amen.

I'll now ask Matt to read to us some words from the 1st Letter of Peter to the first century church, who were struggling with persecution and making sense of the good news of Jesus Christ whilst living through the challenges of their time in history.

The reading is from 1 Peter Chapter 2, verses 2- 10

Like newborn babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation. Cry out for this nourishment, now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness. You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honour. And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God. As the Scriptures say, "I am placing a cornerstone in Jerusalem, chosen for great honour, and anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." Yes, you who trust him recognise the honour God has given him. But for those who reject him, "The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone." And, "He is the stone that

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makes people stumble, the rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they do not obey God's word, and so they meet the fate that was planned for them. But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. "Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God's mercy."

Peter was writing to first century Christians, as I said, and his purpose was to encourage them through their time of struggle. He knew that they needed to be strong in all that was happening then, and he was encouraging them to find their strength, and to grow in confidence through their knowledge and experience of God in Christ. He was the cornerstone of their faith - the rock at the heart of everything, and God was building them into a new people for his purposes - living stones for his Kingdom on this earth. The words we heard were written to a first century church, and they are preserved in our Bible because they have spoken to Christians in every time and history, and they speak to us, here and now in ours.

Our lives are very different from the first century church, but we in our time in history are living through an unprecedented experience, a time of tremendous widespread suffering, a time of intense anxiety, a time of so many unknowns, with no clear path forward. It's profoundly unsettling. Some days weigh heavily upon us, while others seem to fly by.

I want to encourage you, where ever you find yourselves today. I want to encourage you to look to Christ, the cornerstone, the rock, the one who loves you and has called you to be among his people. The one who values you and honours you, and who has called you to live in his wonderful light. He is the source of your strength and your peace, and he hears your cries for hope and for reassurance.

Let's sing again. This is a recording I made some years ago of a song which seems very apt as we live through this time, one day at a time. Here as we kneel.

Song: Here As We Kneel

*Here as we kneel, here as we pray,
here as we plead, so many words to say,
So You are here, never to leave,
pouring peace into the hollows of our hearts,
And You give the strength for coping just for today,
And You grant us peace in going Your way,
And Your power flows in where faith is faltering,*

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*never weakening, never altering,
Lord we believe that Your grace is sufficient for today, for today.*

*Here as we kneel, here as we pray,
here as we plead, so many words to say,
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Clare Stainsby

In these weeks of isolation, we have moved from the end of winter into spring. And what a beautiful spring it is being! In the first days, the trees were bare of leaves, with branches silhouetted across the sky beyond the garden. But, as March progressed into April, leaves appeared until the world is an amazing array of shades of green, enhanced by the fairly steady sunshine we've been experiencing, which has been a real blessing in itself. So now I can no longer see birds sitting on the branches of distant trees, or for that matter even in the branches of the trees in the garden, as they hide among the leaves, though I can hear their song, constantly - and very uplifting it is too.

There's a passage in the book of Revelation which intrigues me, and sets me thinking. It's in Revelation Chapter 22 - the very last chapter of the Bible. In Chapter 21 John describes his vision of a new heaven and a new earth, with a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, heralding a time when God's dwelling place will be among his people. Then in Chapter 22 he talks further about the Holy City and what he sees, and he says this: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

"The river of the water of life, with the tree of life on its banks, bearing fruit and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

The vision of the new heaven and a new earth are not unique to the book of Revelation. Isaiah, Ezra, and other Jewish writings present this vision, which was and is part of Jewish expectation. And all reveal a time when sorrow is ended, sin is past, and time leads into eternity.

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In chapter 22 of Revelation, John describes the river flowing through the city. Actually the city of Jerusalem was not built on a river at all, but the river flowing through the city of God is also an image from the Old Testament. There was a river that flowed through the garden of Eden in Genesis, and made it fruitful. Ezekiel talks about his vision of the river of God flowing from the Temple, and the Psalmist along with Joel and Zechariah all talk about the river of the city of God. The river of God's love, the source of energy and fruitfulness, is there at the heart of God's world, and flows from God for the benefit of the world and for its people.

My interest is mainly in the Tree of life, which stands on the banks of the river. The tree of life also comes from the Garden of Eden, in Genesis 3. Later in the Old Testament, Ezekiel refers to the tree, whose fruit will feed the people and whose leaves will be for healing. John echoes this image of a tree bearing much and frequent fruit, with leaves for healing the nations.

If ever the nations needed healing it is now. There has never been a time when there has been so much sickness in so many nations at the same time, or at least not in an age when the nations could have such knowledge of each other's situations and suffering through mass media. Of course there have been times of wide-spread illness, that we can all remember. I'm thinking of the Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa a few years ago, where there were so many images on our TV screens of those who were suffering and dying. There was swine flu about 10 years ago, and SARS almost 10 years before that. And in many countries across the world there have been epidemics of measles and cholera, dengue fever, yellow fever and malaria, among others in the last 20 years - though most of these have barely reached our news, as they were effecting countries that seem very remote to us.

But nothing on the scale of Covid-19. Nothing that has hit the developed countries of the world so significantly. Nothing that has rattled around the world at this pace, affecting so many nations in such a short space of time, with no cure, and no apparent way to stop it, apart from the people of this world barricading themselves in their own homes, and staying apart. Never have the nations of this world needed healing so much.

But I wonder if the healing that is needed could also possibly be at hand. Look at the way nations are sharing knowledge and practice with one another, in ways we are coping with the virus, and in the ways we are together seeking an answer to get its spread under control. Is this just a passing moment? Or is there a greater will for cooperation across the globe than at any other time in the past? Time will tell.

John recalls that in the garden of Eden there stood the tree of life, and that at the end of time its leaves will somehow offer a balm for the wounds and sores of every nation under the sun. Can I just say at this point, that I don't



for a minute think that this is the end of time that we are living through. There will be life after coronavirus. There will be a return to face to face existence, and movement, and all the things that we have always taken for granted in our lives. People through history have always been trying to identify the end times, and I don't believe that these are they, any more than any other time in history has been it. This is just another time of particular and unexpected struggle, but life will go on beyond it. We just don't know when and how - not yet at any rate. But there will be a time when we will look back on now and reflect, and begin to make sense of all that is currently happening. But let's get back to those leaves of the tree of life mentioned by John.

Leaves are part of a living plant - and currently all around us, in glowing profusion. Every nation on earth has found the healing properties of certain plants throughout the history of the human race. In time before science, herbal remedies were where everyone turned. And indeed, many of our remedies for ailments today have their origins in herbalism: take aspirin, or quinine or morphine for example.

I know in my childhood, and indeed as an adult I have turned to the soothing effect of a dock leaf after a nettle sting. It's very simple and yet very effective in taking away the initial pain of the sting. And remarkably the two - nettles and dock leaves - often grow near each other. The remedy for the problem is close at hand to the cause of the problem.

I wonder if the remedy for this world's current ills is close at hand. I wonder if a vaccine for Coronavirus is close at hand? I wonder if a cure for this world many ills could be close at hand, as nations seemingly support one another and work together. Or will this opportunity be lost by the continued sabre rattling of the US and Russia? Will the abating of the Covid 19 see us all retreat behind our borders, and get on with our separate lives? Will the economic crises that are likely to follow this time cause the nations to fight for their own corner, their own people, at the expense of those without power and influence in the world? Will the poor, the hungry, the displaced and those with less universal illnesses be set aside, as the rich nations work selfishly for a return to their own prosperity?

Everything is unknown. I suspect that this crisis has brought us all to a place where we look at the world, and wonder what is shifting, whether it is shifting for the better or for the worse, and where it will end. We can only wait and watch and hope and pray for a better future.

During these weeks of isolation, most days I've got showered and dressed. And most days I've put on a pair of earrings. The ones I go to regularly as these - they are like little silver leaves, can you see that. They are my prayer that leaves of the tree of life may bring healing to this world. The tree of

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life grows on the banks of the river that flows from God's throne. The river is its source of nourishment and fruitfulness, and the tree produces the leaves for healing the ills of this world. God is the centre of everything: the rock at the heart of his city; and the source of the healing, not just of the physical illness all around us, but also of all that is destructive and unjust and unhealthy in this world. My earrings are just a reminder to me, to pray and to join my prayers with others across this world, for the healing that is so much needed.

John's account in revelation is a prophecy of a time when all will know with certainty, that God is there at the midst of it all; when all will see Christ for whom he really is - alive and present and on the throne at the centre of all things; a time when the tree of life will flourish again in this world for ever.

Let's remember, as we heard earlier, that God has called us to be his people, built upon the solid foundations he provides for us, ready to work with him for his Kingdom on this earth. While we can't do much beyond the walls of our own homes at present, we can all pray, for the healing of this world, for the healing of the nations, for the healing of this world's people, in God's way and God's time. We can do that any time, any place and whenever we remember. It is part of our calling to live as Christ's followers, and that calling takes us way beyond the limitations of our church buildings through the experiences of every day, in every place we find ourselves.

Let's pray for that healing now. Let us pray.

The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

We pray for the healing of all who are suffering from the virus right now.

We pray for the healing of overwhelming anxiety and fear.

We pray for the healing of loneliness and hopelessness.

We pray for the healing of sadness and the great pain of loss.

We pray for the healing of selfishness at every level.

We pray for the healing of relationships.

We pray for the healing of animosity between nations.

We pray for the healing of injustice, wherever it is found.

We pray for the healing of greed and a desire for power over others.

We pray for the healing of your church for your purposes here on earth.

In our praying for healing, we also pray, here I am Lord. Use my prayers. Use my actions. Use my energy and my vision. Use my voice, my hands, my feet, and may I as one of your chosen, beloved people, be ready to work with you, in prayer and action for your Kingdom on this earth. Bring your healing, and use me to be a part of that. In the name of the risen living Jesus. Amen.



Let's end with a final song, another I recorded long ago, but one you all know.

See you next week.

Song: I the Lord of Sea and Sky.

*I the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry,
All who dwell in dark and sin, my hand will save.
I who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright,
Who will bear my light to them, whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord. Is it I Lord? I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me, I will hold Your people in my heart.*

*I the Lord of snow and rain, I have heard my people's pain,
I have wept for love of them, they turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone,
I will speak my word to them, whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord. Is it I Lord? I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me, I will hold Your people in my heart.*

*I the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame,
I will set a feast for them, my hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide, till their hearts be satisfied,
I will give my life to them, whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord. Is it I Lord? I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if You lead me, I will hold Your people in my heart.*

Daniel L. Schutte

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