

20th March 2022 Morning Service

A time to grow

Megan Ashmore

Call to Worship - Song of Songs 2:11 – 13

See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone.

Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land.

The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.

Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.

Today is officially the first day of Spring - the time of reawakening and regrowth. It is a time when hope of brighter days is confirmed and flora and fauna respond to the love of their creator, our father God. So let us join our voices in praise of Him who is faithful and loving as we sing our first hymn ...

StF 65 – Sing of the Lord's goodness

1) Sing of the Lord's goodness
Father of all wisdom
Come to Him and bless His name
Mercy He has shown us
His love is forever
Faithful to the end of days

3) Courage in our darkness
Comfort in our sorrow
Spirit of our God most high
Solace for the weary
Pardon for the sinner
Splendour of the living God

*Ch) Come then, all you nations
Sing of the Lord's goodness
Melodies of praise and thanks to God
Ring out the Lord's glory
Praise him with your music
Worship Him and bless His name*

4) Praise him with your singing
Praise him with the trumpet
Praise God with the lute and harp
Praise him with the cymbals
Praise him with your dancing
Praise God till the end of days

2) Power He has wielded
Honour is His garment
Risen from the snares of death
His word He has spoken
One bread He has broken
New life He now gives to all

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Reading: Psalm 63:1-8

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Prayer of Adoration & Thanksgiving

Almighty God, we praise you for all that you are – creator, sustainer, healer, guide, comforter, redeemer. All around we see signs of your presence with us and we delight in the many blessings you bestow upon us each day. Loving Father, we thank you for your faithfulness to us – that when we seek you, you are there. Though we wander away from you, you never leave us, but are always waiting for us to turn back to you. We give thanks for your infinite grace and mercy that knows no bounds.

Generous God, may we never fail to recall how broad and long, how high and deep, is your love for us. A love that gifted to us your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, who has redeemed us by his blood and brought us into a full and everlasting relationship with you. And we rejoice in your life-giving Spirit, which equips us and enables us to live our lives in service to you. We bow our heads before you and with humble hearts say, Thank you. **Amen.**

StF 430 – My lips shall praise you

- Ch) My lips shall praise you, my great Redeemer;
My heart will worship, Almighty Saviour.*
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| 1) You take all my guilt away,
Turn the darkest night to brightest day;
You are the restorer of my soul. | 2) Love that conquers every fear,
In the midst of trouble you draw near;
You are the restorer of my soul. | 3) You're the source of happiness,
Bringing peace when I am in distress;
You are the restorer of my soul. |
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Reading: Isaiah 55: 1- 9

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a ruler and commander of the peoples. Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendour.”

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Reading: Luke 13: 1 – 9

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

Reflection

I wonder which is your favourite Christmas film. Do you like White Christmas the best, with its feel good musical numbers, humour and romance? Or do you prefer the zany antics of Elf? Maybe you like the comic genius of the “Nativity” films, which, if you have ever been involved in putting on a nativity play, you will know are very true to life!! Much as I enjoy all of those my Christmas viewing wouldn’t be complete without A Christmas Carol, and especially the Muppet version.

Now, I expect you’re questioning why I am thinking about Christmas films in the season of Lent. Well, like the saying “A dog is not just for Christmas, it’s for life”, I believe this film too is for life. Certainly the message is appropriate for all time. In fact I think Lent is the perfect time to read this story as we spend time reflecting on our own lives as followers of Christ. It definitely links in with our reading from Luke.

At the beginning of our gospel reading, we are informed of two recent tragedies that have occurred – the killing of Galileans at worship, and the collapse of a tower in Siloam. In the light of these recent tragedies, about which the crowd are talking, Jesus tells a parable to draw attention to the fragility of life and the need to turn to God to receive life eternal. Ever the teacher, Jesus uses every opportunity to share the good news of God’s love and care for His people. The parable focusses on an unproductive fig tree. We are told that the owner comes for the third year in a row to look for figs but once again finds nothing. In his impatience he tells the gardener to chop it down. The gardener courageously suggests that the tree be given one last chance and offers to care for it himself.

As was his custom, Jesus used everyday objects and familiar events and occurrences to help the people to understand the meaning of his message. Many of the listeners, would have agreed readily that a tree which does not produce fruit should be cut down, and coming on the back of the previous sentence, in which Jesus told them the consequences of not turning away from sinning, it wouldn’t have been too difficult for them to realise what he was getting at. Jesus makes it explicitly clear that there is a finite time for the people then, as there is for us today, to turn back to God and begin to bear fruit before our time is up. God is a God of mercy, but He is also a God of righteous judgement.

While Jesus determinedly sets out the message of repentance in no uncertain terms, he also reassures the crowd that there is still hope. The gardener in the parable offers to care for and tend to the tree, describing how he will do this by digging round it and adding fertiliser. The tree is not expected to go it alone for the next year – it will be supported in its growth and management. This act of grace gives the tree a new opportunity to provide fruitful service in response to the one to whom it owes its very life.

Think back to the story of Scrooge in “A Christmas Carol”. He was not left to flounder but visited by three ghosts who gently show him the error of his ways and lead him to make amends and live a better life in the future. Scrooge is given a glimpse of his past, invited to see things in the present that usually pass him by, and is forced to consider what the future will hold if he doesn’t change. The ghosts go all out to help Scrooge, as will the gardener to ensure the tree has the best chance to survive.

So it is with us. Jesus has already gone all out for us. We are reminded of this in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, where he states that Jesus willingly gave up everything for us. He writes:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Jesus did that for our sakes – that we might have life in all its fullness – a life enriched by God’s promises and blessings of hope, joy, peace and love. And more than that, God considers us His own dear children, who are promised a crown and a share in the inheritance of God’s kingdom. Not because of anything we have done, but because God first loved us. God is not going to give up on us. He has invested too much on our behalf. The only thing stopping us from bearing fruit is us!

So why might we not be producing fruit?

Lent is a time for reflection. It offers us a time to scrutinise our way of living and examine whether we are bringing glory to God by serving Him in our daily lives. I suggest there may be three things we need to consider in light of this parable of Jesus: our soil, our roots and our branches.

A tree that is going to produce fruit needs to be planted in good soil – soil which will anchor the tree and encourage growth by feeding it. What is our soil? Our soil is the word of God, both the written word and the Living Word. As we read God’s written word we should enjoy the richness of the language; take up the goodness it offers, and settle in to expand our understanding of what it means to be in relationship with God, our Father. The written word feeds and nourishes us. The Living Word is Jesus, who anchors us to the truth and stops us drifting away. In the midst of the mess and uncertainty; the pain and sorrow; the frustration, anger and despair of this earthly life, Jesus is here. The gardener stated that he would dig around the fig tree and fertilise it well. Does our soil need digging over and enriching with goodness to enable us to grow better? Let’s endeavour to delve into God’s word a bit deeper this Lent season and trust Jesus to support us to stand strong when the going gets tough.

A tree that is going to produce fruit needs to develop strong roots. In Psalm 1 it is written: *“Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.”*

And in our reading from the book of Isaiah earlier we heard the words, *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters.”* In order to produce fruit we need to make sure we are drawing on all the resources available to us. Jesus himself said that he is the living water. Are we reaching out to him and accepting the life blood he gives us? Or are we withering under the pressure of trying to go it alone? Stretch out your roots to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who will renew and sustain you as you grow.

A tree that is going to produce fruit needs branches that flourish. When we really take on board God’s word and realise its implications for our daily living; and reach out and accept the love and grace of God, then we will delight to do God’s will, and will flourish and bear good fruit. Jesus himself said, *“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit”*. But Jesus also reminded us that branches need pruning from time to time to ensure growth. Is there something in your life that needs pruning away? Something that is hindering the full development of your relationship with God? Invite God to be the gardener of your life.

John the Baptist, when calling people to repent also warned that time was running out.

“The axe is ready to cut down the trees at the roots; every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire.”, he declared.

But recall the words of Isaiah: *“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.”*

As Spring bursts forth and displays its new life, may we recommit our thoughts and ways to our Lord, to bring forth good fruit pleasing to Him.

And when we hear about the events of the world at this present time, we should give thanks to God for the life we have, but we need to consider too how we will live the life we get to live.

Prayer of Confession

Lord God, we come before you now to acknowledge that we have not always been bearers of good fruit. Forgive us our selfishness; impatience; unkindness; intolerance; grumbling; unfriendliness; unfaithfulness. Dig around me and fertilise me with your love and grace. **Amen.**

StF 446 – I will offer up my life

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| 1) I will offer up my life
in spirit and truth,
Pouring out the oil of love
as my worship to you.
In surrender I must give
my every part;
Lord, receive the sacrifice
of a broken heart. | <i>Ch) Jesus, what can I give,
What can I bring
To so faithful a friend,
To so loving a King?
Saviour, what can be said,
What can be sung
As a praise of your name
For the things you have done?
O my words could not tell,
not even in part,
Of the debt of love that is owed
by this thankful heart.</i> | 2) You deserve my every breath
for you've paid the great cost;
Giving up your life to death,
even death on a cross.
You took all my shame away,
there defeated my sin,
Opened up the gates of heav'n,
and have beckoned me in. |
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Prayers of Intercession

We begin our prayers of intercession with a prayer for Ukraine, taken from the Methodist Church website:
Loving God, your Son Jesus Christ, wept over Jerusalem.

Today, we weep over Ukraine.

We weep for those uprooted from their homes and lives.

We weep for those cowering in basements.

We weep for those who have witnessed death and destruction on their streets.

We weep for those separated from parents, from children, from spouses and siblings.

We are amazed at the resilience of people seeking to comfort those in need and so we pray for
Governments opening up borders so that Ukrainians can have safe passage.

We pray for churches and individuals providing food, clothing and shelter.

We pray for medical workers ensuring that shattered bodies are put back together again.

We pray for ordinary Russians demonstrating and voicing their disapproval of the military actions in
Ukraine.

May the Holy Spirit give us the willpower to turn our tears into action also.

May we, through our words, prayers and example pursue the things that make for a just peace in the world
today and especially in Ukraine. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. **Amen.**

Father, in all the corruption and double standards which damage and unnerve our world, we thirst for your
Spirit of truth, purity and goodness... [Silence]

L: Living Spirit of God **R: Quench our thirst.**

Father, we thirst for your Spirit of love which notices needs, considers no job beneath itself, and delights in
each person's gifts... [Silence]

L: Living Spirit of God **R: Quench our thirst.**

Father, we thirst for your Spirit of compassion which binds up wounds,
Supports the nervous and frail. And visits the imprisoned and afraid... [Silence]

L: Living Spirit of God **R: Quench our thirst.**

Father, may we thank you with our lives as well as our lips,
For the constant outpouring of your Spirit to us... [Silence]

L: Living Spirit of God **R: Quench our thirst.**

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 who 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.**

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 for ever. **Amen.**

StF 51 – Great is thy faithfulness

1) Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

*Ch) Great is Thy faithfulness!
Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*

2) Summer and winter, and springtime
and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

3) Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and
to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope
for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

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Benediction

Lord God, accept these our monetary gifts and with them our lives in service to you, that we can grow and bear fruit to fill this world with your love. And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be upon us, now and forever. **Amen.**