

Sunday morning service – 27/06/2021

CALL TO WORSHIP: Psalm 36:5-10

- ⁵ *Your unfailing love, O LORD, is as vast as the heavens;
your faithfulness reaches beyond the clouds.*
- ⁶ *Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your justice like the ocean depths.
You care for people and animals alike, O LORD.*
- ⁷ *How precious is your unfailing love, O God!
All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of your wings.*
- ⁸ *You feed them from the abundance of your own house,
letting them drink from your river of delights.*
- ⁹ *For you are the fountain of life, the light by which we see.*
- ¹⁰ *Pour out your unfailing love on those who love you;
give justice to those with honest hearts.*

SONG: Love of the Father

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=QVA5s0w17I8&list=RDAMVMQVA5s0w17I8>

PASTORAL PRAYER (Becky Douglass)

Father God, We come to you in a very different situation than we were expecting just yesterday morning. And yet we know this is no surprise to You. You are still at work in these difficult circumstances, and we can trust you to lead us through this. You love us more than we can ever fathom, and You are with us even when we feel isolated from our family and friends.

We pray for the government officials and medical people who need to make difficult decisions over the coming days. May they be guided by You, even if they don't acknowledge You. We pray that good decisions will be made, and that the infection rate will be controlled. We pray for increased supplies of the vaccines to be made available. We pray that people in our community would do the right thing. We commit this situation to you, knowing that nothing is beyond your control.

We pray for your church throughout the Sydney area which has had to adjust very quickly to these changing circumstances. We pray that they will be enabled by your Spirit to help their people to focus on You and find rest in You. May Your church be a beacon of love and hope to the community.

As we enter lockdown, we are reminded of our partners in ministry who are already dealing with the difficulties of COVID. We ask for Your healing and comfort for the Newby's as they are infected with COVID and do not have access to medical care that we enjoy. We don't know how they are doing currently, but you do. May you provide all that they need.

We pray for Caleb and Grace who are in lockdown in Uganda. Keep Grace safe as she is restricted from travelling home to Caleb. We also pray for Caleb as he seeks to lead his church and find new ways to encourage them and support them when they cannot be together. They do not have the easy access to technology which we have but we know that is no barrier for you, God. We pray for your provision and creativity.

We also pray for the Bakons as they are scheduled to fly to Spain this coming week. We do not know if the current situation in Sydney will impact them, but it must be causing extra uncertainties and complications. We pray that You would smooth the way for them to go and provide all that they need.

We also think of Kit and Gabbi who work with High School and college students. They are on holidays at the moment, but we know this lockdown will be concerning for their students. May they be able to share your answers to the questions which arise.

Father God, even before this current lockdown, some of our people have been going through difficult times. We think especially of Lorraine and her family as they seek to support her daughter-in-law Liz as she begins radiation and chemotherapy this next week. We pray for the healing of Liz's brain cancer. You know exactly what is happening in her brain. May You make the treatment effective. And we pray for your peace in her heart and mind in spite of the effects of the medication and surgery. May she know Your presence in her darkest times.

We also ask for the on-going needs of those in our congregation who continue to deal with physical issues. We pray for strength and healing for their bodies and peace for their hearts. Please show us how we can be of practical assistance at this time and bring them to our minds as they need our prayers.

Finally, Father, as we are separated from each other over these next couple of weeks, may we will stay in touch with each other via the phone and internet. Prompt us to make contact when it is most needed. Amen.

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us in the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever.
Amen.*

SONG: Great is thy Faithfulness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTKlqmdfHSk>

BIBLE READING

Jeremiah 17:5-8

- ⁵ *This is what the LORD says:
"Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans,
who rely on human strength
and turn their hearts away from the LORD.*
- ⁶ *They are like stunted shrubs in the desert,
with no hope for the future.
They will live in the barren wilderness,
in an uninhabited salty land.*

- ⁷ *“But blessed are those who trust in the LORD
and have made the LORD their hope and confidence.*
- ⁸ *They are like trees planted along a riverbank,
with roots that reach deep into the water.
Such trees are not bothered by the heat
or worried by long months of drought.
Their leaves stay green,
and they never stop producing fruit.*

REFLECTION: Green Leaf in Drought-time (Becky Douglass)

When I came across these verses again a few weeks ago, I didn't know we would be in this situation today! But God knew and He knew that we would need this encouragement, this promise today. It may have taken us by surprise, but not Him!

I was looking through our bookcase for another book when I came across one which had been in my mother's library – Green Leaf in Drought-time by Isobel Kuhn. Isobel Kuhn and her husband were missionaries with China Inland Mission at the time when China was taken over by the Communists. In 1950, she escaped as a refugee with her six-year-old son through the jungles of Burma to freedom. Over the next few years, the rest of the missionaries were evacuated – 601 adults and 284 children in all. Miraculously all made it to safety. Not one was lost. The final two – Arthur Matthews (an Australian) and Dr Clarke – were held by the communists for two years before being released. Their wives and children were also with them for much of this time. They were starved and mistreated and often disappeared with no news for them for weeks at a time. Eventually they were released on July 23, 1953 to the joy of their families and colleagues who had been praying for them so long.

Their release was wonderful, but Isobel felt that was not the most amazing thing. She writes:

The most amazing of all was their spiritual vigour. Whence came it? Not from themselves: no human being could go through such suffering and come out so sweet and cheerful. Just read the contemporary writings of godless P.O.W.s – bitter and cursing even when they had the grit to endure.

Then, in a prayer meeting she was reminded of our reading from Jeremiah. She goes on to say:

That was it! There was an unseen Source of secret nourishment, which the communists could not find and from which they could not cut them off.

This is the story ... of the secret Source by which a tree can put forth green leaves when all others around are dried up and dying from the drought ... This is needed by all of us. Your drought may not be caused by Communism but the cause of the drying up of life's joys is incidental. When they dry up – is there, can we find a secret Source of nourishment that the deadly drought cannot reach?

While it is true that our suffering is nothing like that of these missionaries, it has still been a difficult time. We have not faced the level of threat from COVID that our partners overseas are facing right now – the Newby's all sick with it in a rural area of the Philippines with limited medical care and Caleb and Grace, separated and in extended lockdown as COVID ravages their country. And yet, it has still been a difficult time for us and we are feeling the “drought” of reduced fellowship and constant changes to our plans. Health issues and even the passing of those dear to us which would

have been difficult in normal times have been made more stressful by COVID restrictions. We have felt the “drought” of normal supports which would have made these times more bearable. The changing restrictions make it difficult to plan and we feel the “drought” of those things which we love to do. We long to just forget about COVID for a couple of days and do whatever we want!!

Our situation is different, but the answer to the “drought” we may be feeling is the same.

*But blessed are those who trust in the LORD
and have made the LORD their hope and confidence.*

Our hope and confidence don't come from man-made solutions like vaccines and lockdowns, as necessary and helpful as these may be. We cannot trust that these things will overcome the “drought” we are facing. They may help with our physical condition, but our needs go much deeper than that. We need to know that no matter what happens – even if the very worst happens and we or our loved ones get sick and die – even then, God is able to carry us through and be our hope and strength.

We may have to endure the heat and the drought, but if our roots go down deep into God, then nothing can ultimately harm us. God himself will provide us with all that we need.

*They are like trees planted along a riverbank,
with roots that reach deep into the water.
Such trees are not bothered by the heat
or worried by long months of drought.*

This is an image which God uses over and over again in the Bible to explain His sustaining power. (see: Isaiah 58:11; Psalm 1:3; Colossians 2:6,7) The original readers of the Bible all lived on the edge of the desert. They knew the devastation of drought, but they also knew the hope of the oasis – a green space in the middle of the desert which was able to survive the worst conditions.

And God's promise is not just that those who send their roots down deep into Him will survive the drought. It is greater than that. Those who trust in Him will thrive and bring blessing to those around them.

*Their leaves stay green,
and they never stop producing fruit.*

At the end of Isobel Kuhn's book, she makes this observation:

It is clear to us now that the Lord's purpose in deliberately bringing His servants into the net (of Communist oppression) was that they might live their message before the eyes of the weak and frightened little church.

Was the Chinese Christian falsely accused? So were Arthur and Wilda Matthews. Was he persecuted? So were they. Was he subtly reduced to poverty? So were they. Was he attacked by sickness and bereavement without much medical aid? So were they. Was he laughed at? jeered at? constantly humiliated? So were they ...

And yet as trial was piled upon trial; as the ground (their human comforts) grew so parched with drought that it threatened to crack open, their leaf was still green. Every evening the sound of singing and praise to their dear Lord ascended.

What more potent message could God have given these people? He ... poured His life through the Matthews' that the Chinese church might see and might desire.

These are difficult times for our world. As Christians, we are not always sheltered from this. But we don't need to be destroyed by our circumstances. May we "*let our roots go down into him and our lives be built on him*" (Col 2:7) so that we will be sustained in this time of drought. And as we find our strength and hope in God alone, may others see our lives and be drawn to the only source of "living water" – God himself.

*I will pour water on him that is thirsty,
I will pour floods upon the dry ground.
Open your heart to the gift I am bringing.
While you are seeking, I will be found.
(From The Holiest of All by Andrew Murray)*

PRAYER

Dear God, we acknowledge that we often take our eyes off you and look instead at the problem in front of us. Lord, fill our hearts with the knowledge of Your presence with us and Your love for us. Open Your Word to us and give us the nourishment we need. And as we walk with You, may we be a blessing to those around us, especially those who do not know You. May we be channels of Your peace to those who need it most at this time. Amen.

SONG: Holy Overshadowing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJWetk7zbGE>

BENEDICTION: Romans 15:13,33

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. The God of peace be with you all. Amen