

Haverhill Methodist Church – Worship at Home
Sunday 17th January 2021

Welcome Message – Revd. Peter Goodhall

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son. (Colossians 1:13)
Let us draw near to God and open our hearts in praise and worship.

Gathering Prayer

In the midst of all that happens,
Come to us, Lord.
On the mountaintop and in the valley,
Come to us, Lord.
In company and in solitude,
Come to us, Lord.
In our worship and in our service,
Come to us, Lord.

Hymn/Song

Prayer of trust

Gracious God, in the storms of winter you are our calm, our safe haven.

Spirit of calm, give us peace.

Gracious God, in the cold of winter you are our hearth, our centre, the source of life and love.

Spirit of life and love, inspire us.

Gracious God, in the darkness of winter you are our light, a beacon to guide.

Spirit of hope, shine in us.

Gracious God, in the beauty of winter, the gleam of frost, and the sharp, bright air, you are our joy.

Spirit of delight, lift our hearts in praise.

Gracious God, in the heart of winter you are our longing, you are our promised spring.

Spirit of truth, live in our lives and fill the world we pray.

Amen.

Bible Readings

St Paul writes of the new confidence faith in Jesus Christ brings, showing us that suffering does not have to be worthless.

Romans chapter 5 verses 1-5

We read part of Jesus' farewell discourse in the upper room. He speaks of the Holy Spirit.

John chapter 16 verses 12-15

Hymn/Song

Sermon

When we open a newspaper or watch the news we find ourselves coming face to face with real life stories of men women and children who are making the headlines.

There is much bad news and sad news.

We are in the eye of the storm that is Coronavirus.

It dominates our news and our lives.

And, pushed beyond front-page news, there are many other sad stories of human tragedy, natural disaster and conflict.

Such events leave behind a trail of destruction and heartbreak.

I remember some years ago I saw a typing error in a service sheet.

It had these words of a hymn:

'I the Lord of sea and sky, I have made my people cry'

It should have read: 'I have heard my people cry'.

Sometimes we wonder where is God?

Does he make his people cry?

Our Bible readings today speak into human suffering.

In our gospel reading, Jesus held back from his friends that which he said would be: "More than you can now bear".

It is just as well that we do not know what troubles might lie in store.

Life would be unbearable.

We would live life looking over our shoulder, frozen in fear.

Thankfully, many of us will not face the worst kind of traumas we witness in the news.

But we know that we are not exempt from suffering.

We are not exempt from illness, bereavement, redundancy, disappointment, tragedy and loss.

We hope for the best in life and we do all we can to protect ourselves and our loved ones from suffering but there are times when we are visited by suffering.

Suffering is never punishment from God. It is never sent.

Unexpected, undeserved suffering sweeps into our lives like a tornado; touches down and leaves a trail of pain and heartbreak.

Our lives are never the same again.

Paul's words to the church in Rome show the Christian how to view suffering and how to respond to it.

Let's look at Romans chapter 5.

Our reading began with that great affirmation:

'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God'.

Paul is speaking about where we now stand in relationship with God. This is vital because understanding where we stand in relationship with God affects how we shall respond to God when suffering comes. Will suffering turn us to God or from God?

The good news is that through Christ and his cross, God accepts us, we are one with him and we now stand in a place of grace and peace. We are held secure in his hand.

This truth is captured perfectly in these words by the poet Edwin Markham:

*'At the heart of the whirlwind tearing the sky
And flinging the clouds and the towers by,
Is a place of central calm;
So here in the roar of mortal things,
I have a place where my spirit sings,
In the hollow of God's palm'.*

Nothing can pluck us from his loving hand.

God is bigger than whatever chaos or evil we encounter in our world or in our lives. They are contained and they are subdued.

God is in control. God is our anchor, our fixed point whatever comes our way in our ever changing lives.

In all weathers, however dark the sky, God is with us.

His love is unchanging.

God is bigger than whatever trial we face.

We can see pictures of a tornado from the ground – but what about the view from space?

It is interesting to look at satellite images of a whirlwind.

It gave a very different perspective.

Silent black and white video can show the formation of the storm, its movement, and its dispersal.

It is a satellite view on human suffering - the long view.

Paul gives us a satellite view of our sufferings.

He helps us to stand back and take the long view.

We can see the calm before the storm and the calm after the storm.

Paul shows us how our sure standing with God gives us perspective and gives us hope.

The storms of life come and go – changing our lives – yes - but nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our boast is not in ourselves and in our self-sufficiency.

Our boast, our hope is centred on God.

His word is our storm shelter.

God is our refuge and strength.

The danger of the metaphor of a satellite view on human suffering is that God is distant and that he stands and speaks outside of suffering.

Nothing is further from the truth.

We remember how in the Old Testament:

‘The Lord answered Job **out** of the whirlwind’.

There is encounter with God.

In the midst of suffering, in the midst of death, God is not absent.

God is present, God is real. God suffers with us.

In the cross of Christ, we see God suffers for us.

Seeing our suffering as part of Christ’s suffering brings us strength.

There are those who can lose everything but not lose their faith in God. Many, but not all, come out stronger.

Suffering can build up their faith, when you think it would destroy it.

For the Christian, our trials and our sufferings are not pointless.

Here, St Paul describes a golden chain:

‘We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope’. This is a new way of understanding suffering.

It is counter-intuitive.

From a human point of view we might think the opposite is the case; that suffering only produces despair, despair produces resentment and resentment produces misery, and misery produces hopelessness. That would lead us to a very dark place indeed. Instead, Paul sheds light on our suffering.

He speaks of how our lives can bear the fruit of suffering.

Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. This life is a training ground for the life above.

We can stay the course with the help of the Holy Spirit our comforter, our strength. God's blessings do not dry up in suffering.

The Christian writer Charles Ringma helps us when he wrote:

'We might think the God's blessings should always lead us into the way of peace and happiness.

But this is not always the case.

God's blessings can also be the preparation for battle, the strength for the fight,

the provision for the difficult journey,

the enabling for the challenge,

the power to face the enemy and

the grace to resist the temptation.

While we may wish for the smooth pathway, even in the rugged places God has promised to go before us'.

God understands, God suffers with us.

Now, instead of despairing in our trials we can exult or rejoice in hope.

Paul concludes:

'Such hope never disappoints *or* deludes *or* shames us, for God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us'.

When we are under pressure, the Holy Spirit helps us to bear that pressure, the Holy Spirit waters our lives to grow and bring forth good fruit. In our sufferings, the water of the Holy Spirit brings refreshment and renewal.

We are able to stand; we are not overwhelmed by our trials.

We know that like the tornado, all things must pass.

Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

(Psalm 30).

God's morning is coming sooner than we think.

On that new day He will wipe every tear from our eyes.

There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away.

We recall the words of James chapter 1:

'Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him'.

Hymn/Song

Prayers of Intercession

Lord of all, your son Jesus reassured his disciples, fearful for their future, that your Spirit would be with them in good times and bad. The apostle Paul encouraged the church to persevere through suffering. We pray today for those who daily work to find common ground and bring reassurance to those facing an uncertain future. We pray for those who work in hospitals and care homes, doctors, nurses, cleaners, administrators, pharmacists, receptionists and others, who together seek to forge bonds of trust and offer comfort to people separated from their homes, their familiar routines and their health. We pray also for those who are responsible for implementing the Coronavirus vaccines.

Lord, where the unknown threatens,

let your love be known through your servants.

We pray for supermarket workers, delivery drivers, refuse collectors, police, fire fighters, all emergency personnel and all key workers. We pray for all who risk their lives for others.

Lord, where the unknown threatens,

let your love be known through your servants.

We pray for those who work from home and families who are home schooling. Help them to set boundaries between work and play and to find quality time together. We pray for teachers working online.

Lord, where the unknown threatens,

let your love be known through your servants.

We pray for the churches of our town and their leaders, especially those new to our town and area.

In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we give thanks for our friendships across denominations. We pray for our churches together committee meeting online this week.

Lord, where the unknown threatens,

let your love be known through your servants.

We pray for the staff and volunteers at REACH Community Projects and for the people they serve. We give thanks for the positive difference and fresh hope being brought to local people in need. We pray for the January Light projects in our Methodist District. Lord, where the unknown threatens,

let your love be known through your servants.

In the dedicated service shown by all these people, may we discover more of what it means to love one another, as you love each one of us.

Finally, we pray for our own needs.

We pray that in our solitude we may know we are never truly alone and that Jesus is a close friend. May the light of Jesus guide our living and may the love of Jesus inspire us to love and serve our neighbour. We ask these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Unite your prayers with the whole church as you pray The Lord's Prayer. 'Our Father...'

Hymn/Song

The Blessing

We offer our lives and our gifts to the Lord.
May the Lord bless you and keep you;
May the Lord make his face to shine on you:
May the Lord look on you in kindness
And give you peace
Amen.

Coffee Time Conversation

- How well do you live with uncertainty?
- How does your faith help you in time of trial?
- What have you learnt through your trials?

Suggested Hymns and Songs

More Traditional Music:

All my hope on God is founded
Will your anchor hold?
Have faith in God my heart
All praise to our redeeming Lord

More Contemporary Music:

The splendour of the King
The Lord's my Shepherd I'll not want
In Christ alone my hope is found

Keep social distancing.
Keep safe.
Keep communicating.
God bless you and keep you until we meet again.
My prayers are with you.

With love,

Peter