

Haverhill Methodist Church – Worship at Home
Sunday 6th June 2021

Welcome Message – Revd. Peter Goodhall

Jesus beckons us to himself with the invitation:

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and over-burdened, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Opening Prayer

In you alone we put our hope,
God the Father, Creator and Sustainer,
who gives all good things
seen and unseen.

In you alone Jesus we put our hope,
God the Son, Saviour and Redeemer,
who died for our sins
and rose again.

In you alone we put our hope,
God the Holy Spirit, Teacher and Comforter,
who moves us to declare
“Our God reigns!”
In you alone we put our hope. **Amen.**

Hymn/song

Bible Reading

Romans Chapter 8 verses 22-27

Prayer Exercise

The Apostle Paul tells us that the Spirit of God prays for us
“with sighs too deep for words”.
Through the Life-Giving Breath of God,
we are given all that we need.

Let us breathe deeply— inhaling the good gifts that God provides, and exhaling all of the things that we need to release.

Let us breathe in strength. (Pause for breath...)

And, let us exhale our exhaustion. (Pause for breath...)

Let us breathe in freedom. (Pause for breath...)

And, let us exhale all that holds us back. (Pause for breath...)

Let us breathe in a new sense of direction. (Pause for breath...)

And, let us exhale the paths we no longer want to use.

(Pause for breath...)

Let us breathe in hope. (Pause for breath...)

And, let us exhale self-doubt. (Pause for breath...)

Let us breathe in unconditional love. (Pause for breath...)

And, let us exhale distrust and hate. (Pause for breath...)

Holy Spirit, let us feel the touch of your presence in this place.

Blow away our fears and worries,

and help us to breathe in your gifts of new life. **Amen.**

Hymn/song

Sermon

In this season of Pentecost we remember how the Spirit of God breathed upon the first disciples and the church was born.

From that day to this the breath of God has breathed life into his world, into his people from generation to generation.

Breath is life. Breath can also be a sigh.

The dictionary definition of a sigh is this.

A sigh is to emit a long, deep audible breath expressing sadness, relief, tiredness, or similar.

You might sigh in sadness or despair when you watch the news headlines.

You might sigh in relief when you sink into a chair when you have been on your feet all day.

You might sigh with impatience when you are waiting in a queue. 'How much longer'?

A sigh speaks of yearning or longing.

Today, I want to suggest that the breath of God can be a deep sigh.

His breath brings us life but also a longing, a sigh from the heart.

This is clear in our reading from Romans 8.

The apostle Paul describes 3 aspects of this heartfelt sigh.

Let us look briefly at each one in turn.

Verse 22 speaks of a **Sighing Creation**

‘We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time’.

I won’t presume to speak of childbirth.

When my two children were born I was in the room but I wasn’t the one in pain.

There can be no greater sigh than this, the sign of pain, followed by the sigh of relief and joy.

Paul takes this powerful imagery to describe the pain and suffering of this world.

God is bringing a new creation to birth.

The flip side to this is that the old order of things is passing away.

This may all sound pessimistic but it is realistic.

The scriptures tell us that we are but a breath, (Ps 144 v 4) like the flower of the field that withers and fades, (Psalm 103:15) and like water spilled on the ground. (2 Sam 14:14)

We and the whole of creation are captive to decay and decline.

We might sigh with our aches and pains.

Together we sigh at the needs around us.

What Paul is describing here is a collective sigh of creation.

With one voice all nature groans.

We sigh at the suffering of our world.

If we sigh in despair when we watch the news headlines, it is also a sigh of sympathy and empathy.

We are one with creation.

We are brothers and sisters.

They are our neighbours, our concern. God is present.

The breath of God is the deep sigh of creation.

Moving on, in Romans 8, Paul describes a second aspect of this heartfelt sigh.

Verse 23 speaks of **Sighing Sons**.

Paul writes:

‘We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to Sonship, the redemption of our bodies’.

Here we move from earthly things to spiritual matters.

Paul describes our spiritual longing as sons and daughters of God.

We groan inwardly.

The Greek word for ‘groan’ Paul uses here has the sense of to narrow or squeeze.

We can feel that in our trials and sufferings, by outward forces we are being crushed, the life squeezed out of us.

There are dark times when words and prayers fail us. Tears flow. All we can do is utter a primal cry to God - a godly groan.

We are waiting for something.

That something is the completion and the fulfilment of God's purposes.

We are waiting for the kingdom of God to grow to fruition.

At this time we have the first fruit of the Holy Spirit, the first share of the harvest, a first instalment, a pledge that there is more to come.

Another New Testament writing puts it like this:

"We are beloved children of God now, but what we are to be is not apparent yet, but we do know that when Christ appears we are to be like him – for we are to see him as he is' (1 John 3 v2)

This is our hope.

What a wonderful day that will be!

On that great and glorious day our final sigh will be a deep sigh of relief. Phew!

We're home at last! We made it.

We won through. We finished the race.

The battle is over. Our longing is over.

Our tears will be tears of joy.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah 'The redeemed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away'. (Isaiah 51:11)

We shall know full redemption, full salvation; we shall be made perfect, sons and daughters of God receiving our full inheritance.

What a promise. What encouragement.

Now we know:

The church can never breathe its last breath.

Despite how bad things may look, however weak, however shallow our breath.

In life and death we belong to the Lord.

Our dying breath on earth will be followed by our first breath in heaven.

So here and now in hope and trust we wait with patience, remaining faithful in worship, service and witness.

The breath of God is the deep sigh of the church, the deep sigh of his expectant sons and daughters.

Moving on, in Romans 8, Paul describes a third aspect of this heartfelt sigh. It is neither the sigh of creation nor the sigh of God's children. It is the sigh of God.

Verse 26 speaks of the **Sighing Spirit**.

Paul writes:

'In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans'.

This tells us that we don't just have a future hope we have a present help.

The Holy Spirit is on our side, he is our advocate, our counsellor.

This verse speaks of our close communion with God and God with us.

God doesn't say to us in the words of Shakespeare 'sigh no more, ladies', 'sigh no more' – rather God through the Holy Spirit sighs with us.

The spirit prays with us, prays for us, and prays on our behalf.

As one writer put it "Prayer is the divine *in* us appealing to the Divine *above* us." (CH Dodd)

We may feel ignorant yet the Holy Spirit aligns our prayers with the will of God and refines our longings.

Do not ever fear that your prayer is inadequate, your words immature or your knowledge imperfect. God understands.

John Bunyan got it right when he stated:

"When you pray, rather let your heart be without words than your words without heart".

The breath of God is the heartfelt sigh of the spirit.

Life's hardships may leave you speechless, but because you have the spirit, you won't be left prayer less.

Jesus is with you. He understands.

He lived through times when all he could do was pray wordless prayers.

Hebrews 5 confirms this when it says:

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him".

The presence of the Holy Spirit helps us to also unite our will to God's will, our longings, to God's longings.

In this week ahead, in work and rest, in health and sickness, as we go into God's future, may we understand this threefold sigh of the Holy Spirit in creation, in his sons and daughters and in our praying. The breath of God is upon you today and will never depart. Press on and persevere to the end. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Hymn/song

Prayers for Others

As we come to prayer let us remember that we do not have to twist the arm of a reluctant God to seek good things for this world, nor find ways to persuade a distant God to come near and listen to us. Let us remember that as we pray we kneel alongside Jesus Christ, in the presence of God, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

So let us bring to mind now those people who are in need of our prayers:

those who are ill, at home or in hospital;
those who suffer with Long-Covid;
those who are anxious;
those who are lonely or sad;
those who are despairing or defeated;
those who are hungry or homeless;
those whose relationships are breaking apart;
those who are imprisoned for their beliefs;
those who cannot find work;
and those who are over-worked.

In silence now, let us make our own specific prayers for those on our hearts and minds today.....

He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. In the presence of God, alongside Jesus Christ, with help from the Holy Spirit may we go into this week to live out our prayers through our lives. **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.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart;

do not depend on your own understanding.

Seek God's will in all you do, and he will direct your paths.

(Proverbs Chapter 3 verse 5-6)

May the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon you now and always. **Amen.**

Coffee Time Conversation

- Do you like to pray aloud or in your heart?
- What leaves you lost for words and praying in the Spirit?
- Ask the Holy Spirit to breathe on you today.

Suggested Hymns and Songs

More Traditional Music:

What a friend we have in Jesus

And can it be

Now thank we all our God

More Contemporary Music:

As the deer pants for the water

Faithful One, so unchanging

There is a Redeemer

Keep socially distancing.

Keep safe.

Keep communicating.

Keep celebrating the Resurrection of our Lord and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

God bless you and keep you until we meet again.

My prayers are with you.

With love,

Peter