

Sunday 26th April 2020

Good Morning and welcome to worship here at MPN. Wherever you have come from this morning we hope that you are blessed by your time in worship.

This week again we have been blessed with sun and warmth. I don't know about you but I have never noticed how blue the sky is here and that God reminds us that if we take time to be still and not rush around we see more of his creation and when we lift our eyes we don't see the dark of the pavements but the deep blue of the sky. God asks us to lift our eyes and focus on him.

In these times it is so easy to focus on the dark times, not knowing from day to day. Things being described as ground hog day but

Psalm 24

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;

² for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters.

³ Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?
Who may stand in his holy place?

⁴ The one who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not trust in an idol
or swear by a false god.^[a]

⁵ They will receive blessing from the Lord
and vindication from God their Saviour.

⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek your face, God of Jacob.^{[b][c]}

⁷ Lift up your heads, you gates;
be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

⁸ Who is this King of glory?
The Lord strong and mighty,
the Lord mighty in battle.

⁹ Lift up your heads, you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

¹⁰ Who is he, this King of glory?

The Lord Almighty—
he is the King of glory.

This morning we continue our series through the book of Revelation. Last week we saw John told to write to the Church in Ephesus that their deeds and hard work and perseverance have been noted and their hardships and endurance for Christ noted and they have not grown weary. Last week I said that this sounded like a good faith community.

But John was told to write that “They had forsaken their first love”

The Church in Ephesus was working hard and had not grown weary, but they had forgotten that Christ was at the heart of all they did, and they were to go back to the time when Christ was first in their lives.

Today we move to the Church in Smyrna.

Smyrna is the only one of the seven cities still in existence. Its modern name is Izmir. It was about thirty-five miles north of Ephesus on the west shore of the Aegean Sea.

Its wealth and prosperity led it to contend with Ephesus for the honour of being the foremost city of Asia. Smyrna had supported Rome long before she had become a world power, and as early as 195 B.C. had erected a temple to the goddess of Rome. This naturally made Smyrna a seat of emperor worship, and in 26 B.C., when several cities of Asia were competing for the honour of building a temple to the Emperor Tiberias, Smyrna alone secured this privilege.

The city had riches and status, but the Church was being persecuted and living in poverty.

We read “I know your afflictions and your poverty Yet you are rich”

Christ who tells John to write these words, knows what it like to be poor, to walk this world with nowhere to call home. Who had to wander from place to place because let's face it folk became scared and challenged with what he said, and it became unsafe for him to be in certain places? God came to the earth to experience life all parts of life. The mountain top experiences and the lows of grief and loss. He Esperance it all, never stepped back from any of it.

“When the Bible is read from the perspective of divine nearness, it becomes clear that most prophets, poets, and preachers are particularly worried about religious institutions and practices that perpetuate the gap between God and humanity, making the divine unapproachable or cordoned off behind cadres of priestly mediators, whose interest is in exercising their own power as brokers of salvation. The biblical narrative is that of a God who comes close, compelled by a burning desire to make heaven on earth and occupy human hearts.”

— Diana Butler Bass, Grounded: Finding God in the World-A Spiritual Revolution

God comes near to us in Christ and walks with us through all of this time.

I wondered when we asked folks to suggest passages to us to preach on this year what we had let ourselves in for and the when David said he was leaving I thought Oh I’m preaching in Revelation on my own but there has been so many insights for our time in these passages.

God knows what we are going through right now. We stay apart from family and friends; we miss the things we took for granted. I was never a fan of shopping but now I really don’t like the standing outside waiting and the one-way system inside. I miss my mum telling me what we need. I miss half the shop, but you know what we have what we need. We are rich because we have each other.

God also knows and is with those who suffer through this time, those who are sick and those who mourn. The front-line Dr and nurse who we will never know what they have endured and yet God is with them.

I think back to a conversation I had last year with someone who shared our taxi back to the airport in Malaga. She had been in a retreat hotel and we had driven off the motorway high up into the hill that overlook Marbella. The road became narrow and we wondered if the taxi driver was taking us a route that was a long road for a short cut. Or in my nieces mind he was kidnapping us. Eventually we picked up our passenger.

We introduced each other and of course she asked what I did for a job. I thought well it will be quiet on the way to the airport, sometimes a lot of time people don’t want to talk to a minister. She was the opposite and hold me why she was in Malaga, on her own in a secluded hotel. Her father had died; he had left her money to follow her dreams. But she

sought meaning and purpose. She had tried the Church but the God she had encountered was so different from the Church experience. So, she sought meditation, and Buddhism and yoga. We had a long conversation in the taxi and then I said God is not some distant God, he is with us and in us and around us. It's why I do what I do, I couldn't worship a God who didn't come among his people and know exactly what they were going through. She had been seeking in all the right places but had been looking for the wrong person. Christ was there for her to meet in person and walk with her.

“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”

We are told 365 times in the Bible do not be afraid or fear not, one a day. I think even the slowest of us eventually get that God doesn't want us to live a life of fear but a life that thrives to be the people he has made us to be. In times like these it is easy to read and watch all that is happening and I know at the beginning of this I watched every broadcast, read social media but I was only becoming more anxious, the things we read and focus on are the things that influence our lives and moods and motives. Each day if we focus on our blessings, we change our mood and mindset.

John was told that the Church in Smyrna was afflicted and in poverty and yet it was rich. My taxi companion in Malaga got that riches were not in the money she inherited, she had lost a loved one, no money could make that up for that but she could use her life to find meaning and purpose and live the life that God intended. Only then will we see that riches are not found in money or fame but in the relationship, we have and the purposes that God has for us. So were told “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.”

I've been struck as I read and studied this week that it will be my life that God gives me as a victor's crown. It's what I do with that life. The life I live in this world with other people. The way I serve God and the way I treat those around me.

In these times I see lives being used for the common good. Folks going above and beyond for humanity. A common sense of purpose and hope is the new narrative.

“That it is precisely when we recognize our common humanity—when we recognize our own humanity in the face of the other—it is then that we also recognize the face of God.”

— Diana Butler Bass, Grounded: Finding God in the World-A
Spiritual Revolution

Sometimes we forget and up until now we have lived in a society that was individistic and that riches were fame and fortune. Let us hope that when all this is done, we remember that it is only when we see God in the face of our neighbour and only when we see riches in people that we can be the communities and Churches that God created us to be.

To God the Father
God the Son
God the Holy Spirit
Amen.

I hope that you have a good week and I leave you this week with a blessing

The blessing of God Almighty
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Be with you and remain with you
Now and forever more
Amen.