

First Preach in Penn and Tylers Green

Genesis 18.1-15; Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:8

18th June 2023

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand.”

This is the Good News which Jesus’ life and ministry was devoted to proclaiming as he went about all the cities and villages, teaching in the synagogues, curing the sick and infirm and drawing to him crowds of people who, above all else, needed to hear Good News. We know that they needed good news because Matthew writes that “When Jesus saw the Crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

In truth this can all too easily be our experience of life, we can feel harassed and helpless even as we try our best to tackle the challenges with which we are confronted in our lives; whether this be a challenging week at work, frustrations within our families or social groups, or the

neverending grind of health problems, whether they come through age, illness, or genetics.

It’s good news then that the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand! Jesus is coming to a town or village near you and if you go to him he will teach you, he will heal you, he will make your heart sing with a joyful peace such that you never knew could exist!

And yet with the best will in the world no matter how many people Jesus could engage with, there were yet more people out there with whom he could not physically interact and spend time with. He looked out at the people and he had compassion; his heart ached for their needs and he resolved to make sure that the flock who had no shepherd were sought out by shepherds. To this end he summons the twelve, he shares with them his authority over unclean spirits, the power to cure disease and sickness and he sends them out ‘to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’. Luke, in Chapter 10, writes that Jesus later calls together 72 disciples and sends them out in pairs to every city and village in the region. And in Acts we hear that the Word of God continued to spread and that others joined the disciples in proclaiming the Gospel. Churches begin meeting in homes, Christians teach and

preach in synagogues, market places, and street corners and slowly but surely the scriptures and history shows us that the Church grew into her role as a body of believers who share in the message and power of Jesus Christ.

This is a pattern rooted in Christ's ministry which has been bequeathed to us both through the unending genealogy of the inheritance of faith which we have heard passed on from person to person, but also and most especially presented to us by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of God into our hearts.

As such we find ourselves at once both tasked with a mission: Proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand to the people of Penn and Tylers Green; and, reassured that the power to do so is not limited by our own efforts but is given to us by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

This is what Paul reassures us of in Romans 5:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of

sharing the glory of God.

Our mission is to boast in our hope of sharing the Glory of God; that is we trust and know that although we are sinful, we are imperfect people who have made mistakes both big and small, we know that in Christ Jesus we are able to become more than our failures and misdemeanours, we are able to become Holy - to become in a very real sense people who draw close to God in prayer and worship and find themselves changed by his love to become like Jesus; to become one who has compassion for others and to selflessly be good to those around us, whether they be friends, neighbours or strangers.

Entering the presence of God we become Holy, we become his Children and we find the fullest expression of who we truly are.

Our stories of how this happens are as many and varied as there are each of us. The enormity of God's love is such that he knows each of us by name and joins us in our own lives. There's no 'cookie cutter' vision for what a Christian's life should look like - and I say that as someone whose life superficially looks like it has been

obviously Christian. My mother's father was a vicar, my father is a vicar, and I grew up going to Church. I learned Bible stories and had the opportunity to ask many many questions before deciding that I would like to be confirmed. As it happens, by coincidence or perhaps providence, today is the 17th anniversary of my confirmation! Yet my life has not always been one of easy Christian faith. I have known heartbreak, despair, and frustration - both with myself and with God, asking why he hadn't answered prayers, why certain things had to happen to me, and what are his plans, if any, for my future?

Perhaps in some ways that might resonate with parts of your own stories of faith? We each in our own ways struggle with certain things. Yet Paul continues on to say:

And not only that, we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope - and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

This is the heart of the Gospel, The Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand; the presence of God draws near, entering even into the most secret corners of our hearts and purifying us with his love.

God approaches.

Abraham is remembered as a hero of faith yet Genesis 18 begins: The Lord appeared to Abraham..

Likewise for the people of Israel, Jesus came to their cities and their villages, meeting them in their own lives to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven.

This proclamation was more than speech, but was revealed through his whole life and ministry. When people saw him they saw a glimpse of the heart of God; and this was true whether they saw him , sitting on the prow of a boat, preaching to crowds from the shore, whether they saw him debating with the religious leaders of the day or sharing a meal with disreputable people. And it was true when, impossible as it might seem, they saw him being beaten, mocked and forced to carry the beam of wood which would become the cross upon which he would be crucified and die.

For in our sin and shame we dare not and indeed cannot approach God in his goodness and holiness, and so in his Son Jesus God himself stepped into the world to seize our lives, our flaws, and our sin. He knew it and understood it, and he died to it; dying our death with us and for us so that he could do something extraordinary.

The love of God the Father for his Son Jesus raised him back to life by the power of his Holy Spirit; not simply restoring him to the life he was living before but establishing him as the most truly living human being that has ever lived since the fall of Adam. In dying he died for us; in living, he lives for us. The one who has seized our sin and death has conquered it and by his Holy Spirit pours out into our hearts a hope which shall endure beyond death, beyond even the end of this world as we know it into the eternally prevailing reality of the immense and utterly incomprehensible love of God himself.

The Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand, because God desires to share with us the love which he has for his only Son. Today the nation remembers Father's day with cards, with small gifts and meals out, or with sad

recollections of Father's who are not present for a whole range of reasons or whose presence was unpleasant or even detrimental. Yet no matter the quality of our human fathers, in Jesus' death and resurrection we share with him in his relationship to his heavenly father such that he commands us to call him 'Our Father'. When we recognise the extent of the love which God has for his Son Jesus and realise that this same love is directed squarely at each one of us specifically and by name, then wow can our lives change as we become his Holy, beloved Children; forgiven of our sins, healed our or infirmities and encouraged with hope in our difficulties.

The promise of salvation is tied to the living reality of Christ, the one to whom the Disciples bore witness. In Acts, Peter says: Jesus of Nazareth, a man... (2:22) you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death because it was impossible for him to be held in its power...(2:24) Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified (2:26).

Later he repeats: "we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."(4:20)

Paul writes: “We proclaim Christ Crucified” (1 Cor 1:23)

Again, [for] “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” (Rom 5:8)

This is what we proclaim when we take the bread and wine of [the Eucharist]/[Holy Communion]; this is the inheritance of faith which we have received.

That which we have received we believe. That which we believe we participate in. And that which we participate within is the eternal love-filled life of the God who has conquered sin, death and the devil to claim us, by name, as his sons and daughters.

So let taste the promises of God in the bread and wine and as we do so, let us hear the voice of Jesus ringing out through the scriptures and in our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit, saying:

The Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand.

Amen.