

Bethel Baptist Church

Sunday 16 August 2020

Don't stop with the lions! – 2 Kings 17: 22-33

Prayer

Father, you are the almighty God who created the universe and everything in it and who sustains it by your power. Thank you that you love the men and women you created, sending your son, Jesus Christ, to seek us and save us when we were lost. Thank you for your holiness and righteous – even though that condemns us – and your mercy and grace that saves us. Thank you that you intend to complete the work you have started in us, changing us from the inside out until we become like Jesus. Amen.

Song

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father:
there is no shadow of turning with thee;
thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;
as thou hast been thou forever wilt be.

Great is thy faithfulness!
Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see:
all I have needed thy hand hath provided –
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
join with all nature in manifold witness
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

Reading

2 Kings 17: 22: *The Israelites persisted in all the sins of Jeroboam and did not turn away from them²³ until the LORD removed them from his presence, as he had warned through all his servants the prophets. So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria, and they are still there.²⁴ The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim and settled them in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites. They took over Samaria and lived in its towns.²⁵ When they first lived there, they did not worship the LORD; so he sent lions among them and they killed some of the people.²⁶ It was reported to the king of Assyria: “The people you deported and resettled in the towns of Samaria do not know what the god of that country requires. He has sent lions among them, which are killing them off, because the people do not know what he requires.”*

²⁷ *Then the king of Assyria gave this order: “Make one of the priests you took captive from Samaria go back to live there and teach the people what the god of the land requires.”²⁸ So one of the priests who had been exiled from Samaria came to live in Bethel and taught them how to worship the LORD.*

²⁹ *Nevertheless, each national group made its own gods in the several towns where they settled, and set them up in the shrines the people of Samaria had made at the high places.*

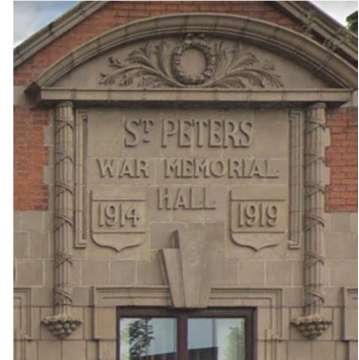
³⁰ *The men from Babylon made Succoth Benoth, the men from Cuthah made Nergal, and the men from Hamath made Ashima;³¹ the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tartak, and the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire as sacrifices to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim.³² They worshipped the LORD, but they also appointed all sorts of their own people to officiate for them as priests in the shrines at the high places.³³ They worshipped the LORD,*

but they also served their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought.

Introduction

Over the past few weeks, Harry has been reminding us that we live in the “last days”. This is the time between the first and second comings of Christ. It is the time of overlap between the last days of this world and the first days of the kingdom of heaven.

When Jesus had been raised from the dead, he lived for about seven weeks as the first new man. His followers saw him and spent time with him and some of the, thought that this was the end of the old age and the beginning of the new one: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6) But it wasn’t. After some weeks Jesus left, having said, “I am going to prepare a place for you.” (John 14:3). The new age had begun, but the old one wasn’t quite finished.



To get a better understanding of the kingdom of heaven being “now and not yet” we only have to look outside the Church at St Peter's War Memorial Hall. It commemorates the Great War, 1914 to 1919. But doesn't everyone know that the war ended in 1918? Yes, the guns did fall silent on 11 November 1918 when the armistice was signed but the peace did not start fully until the Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28 June 1919.

During this time (a time of overlap between peace and war) men were still posted abroad or away from home, reparations had not been agreed and the German fleet was interned at Scapa Flow. If we had lived through that time we would have felt that the peace was “now and not yet”.

Peter asks us a question about these times:

2 Peter 3: 10: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.*

In this time of overlap for the Church, the present is unsettling, the future seems uncertain and we, as God's people, are unfinished.

Unsettling

Jesus warns us that this time before the end will be unsettling:

Luke 21: 7: *“Teacher,” they asked, “when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?” ...²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea.²⁶ Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.²⁷ At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.²⁸ When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

We do not expect, then, to be able to make sense of what is happening in the world. These are the beginnings of the birth pains of the new age (Matthew 24: 8).

How should we live in unsettling times? – With courage.

Luke 12: 32: *“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.*

Uncertain

Peter warns us that in the last days the future will seem uncertain:

2 Peter 3: 3: *First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.⁴ They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”⁵ But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water.⁶ By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed.⁷ By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgement and destruction of ungodly men.*

It will not be clear how God is working out His purposes.

When we studied the book of Revelation last year on Sunday evenings we learnt about what John saw in heaven of the end of the world. We learnt that, in heaven, nothing is concealed – so that when John looks at Jesus he sees him as an incandescent figure (Revelation 1: 12-16), as a slain lamb (Revelation 5: 6) and as a conquering king riding a white horse (Revelation 19: 11-16). When John sees things in heaven he sees “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”.

When these events do come to pass on the earth, we won't see them the same way John saw them and wrote them down – I believe we'll never be quite certain what they are when they happen.

How should we live when the future is uncertain? – With hope.

1 Peter 1: 13: *Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

Unfinished

Are we ready for the age that is to come? I don't think I am. I know that God has saved me and is in the process of making me into the person He wants me to be.

Like me, I expect you are working from the outside in, but He is changing you from the inside out.

Philippians 2: 12: *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

Paul tells us that God has begun to change us but He has not yet finished.

Philippians 1: 3: *I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

What God has in mind for us is perfection: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5: 48).

C.S. Lewis put it like this:

“Dozens of people go to Him to be cured of some one particular sin which they are ashamed of (like cowardice) or which is obviously spoiling daily life (like bad temper). Well, He will cure it all right: but He will not stop there. That may be all you asked; but if once you call Him in, He will give you the full treatment.

That is why He warned people to “count the cost” before becoming Christians. “Make no mistake,” He says, “if you let me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in My hands, that is what you are in for. Nothing less, or other, than that. You have free will, and if you choose, you can push Me away. But if you do not push Me away, understand I am going to see this job through. Whatever suffering it may cost you in your earthly life, whatever inconceivable purification it may cost you after death, whatever it costs Me, I will never rest, nor let you rest, until you are literally perfect — until my Father can say without reservation that He is well pleased with you, as He said He was well pleased with me. This I can do and will do. But I will not do anything less.”

And this brings us to our reading about the immigrants to Samaria.

The King of Assyria, after deporting the people of Israel, settled people from all over the empire in Samaria, but they did not worship the Lord.

The Lord sent lions among them, so the King sent back one of the deported priests to “teach the people what the god of the land requires”. The priest did his job and presumably the lion problem got better. But the people kept a foot in both camps. Along with worshipping the Lord they continued worshipping their old Gods.

How much are we like that? When God has untangled our worst problems do we then want Him to stop? Do we want him to leave us alone after that?

How should we live when we are unfinished people? – By not being content with second best but, like Paul, wanting to press on:

Philippians 3: 8: *What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

Conclusion

We live in a time of overlap between the end of the world and the beginning of the kingdom of heaven.

The present is unsettling; future events are uncertain and we, God's people, are unfinished.

God wants us to trust Him and live with courage, with hope and by pressing on with determination so that we endure to the end and receive our reward.

Prayer

Pray for the people of Lebanon after the explosion. Pray for people around the world who are ill from Covid 19, for their families and for those who are afraid or mourning the loss of loved ones. Pray for people who have lost their livelihoods. Pray for our government and the difficult and controversial decisions they need to take. Pray for each other.

Father, please help us not to be satisfied with second best. Please help us to fix our gaze on Jesus and not to be intimidated by what happens in the world around us. Please help us to place all our trust in You and to keep the faith. Build in us a desire to know Christ so that, like Paul, we can share in His resurrection and in the world to come. Amen.

Roland
9 August 2020