

10am Eucharist on Sunday 22 October from Revd Ceri Payne

Is 45:1-7, 1 Thess 1:1-10 and Matt 22:15-22: In troubled times, Christians keep faith, labour with love, and hope in Christ

*Through the power of your Holy Spirit may your word sound forth, into our hearts and our lives, and into your world. Amen.*

This week by-elections have been won and lost, and doubtless many other ordinary things have come and gone, marked with celebrations or with sadness.

But the news, and much of our public discourse, has been turned towards recent events in Israel and in Gaza. How do our Bible readings answer the question: *where is God in this situation?*

Paul writes to the church of the Thessalonians, having preached to them for only 3 weeks, that already these brand-new believers have ***“become an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia... [and] in every place where your faith in God has become known.”***

Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians’ **work of faith**, their **labour of love**, and their **steadfastness of hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ

In our world today, how are we, whether we are mature in our Christian faith, or brand-new, or scarcely-there-yet believers, **to do the work of faith, to labour with love, and to hold onto hope?**

First, **how do we open ourselves up to the work of faith?**

Paul writes that the work of faith is done not only through the word of God – through the Bible – but ***“in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction”***.

Hearing the word of God given through Isaiah, we remember that the God who formed light and created darkness; the God who made peace and war - good and evil - has not abandoned the world that he created. We trust in the goodness of God across the whole of our world, ***“from the rising of the sun to [its setting] in the west”***.

Just as the snapshot of a single day cannot enable us to understand everything about a marriage, or about our school days, or about our experience of work, so we cannot have a true sense of how history is shaped by looking at any one time or place. We need a long view of history.

Isaiah brings a long view of history to the people of Judah. Going into exile in Babylon, they needed to know, as we still need to know today, that Emperors, and dictators, and even elected leaders, are subject to God, and to God’s hand in history.

God would use the territorial ambitions of Cyrus to bring down the Babylonian empire. That promise that God made to Cyrus, ***“to his anointed”***, that God would ***“open doors before him and the gates shall not be closed”***; the promise that ***“I will go before you and level the mountains”***; would be fulfilled in a very dramatic way.

The Euphrates River flowed through the city walls of Babylon. With metal gates installed underwater and held fast by the force of the water, the ***“doors of bronze ... and] bars of iron”*** of the city of Babylon were considered impregnable.

But the ancient historian Herodotus has recorded how the Persians, under Cyrus, devised a plan to enter Babylon via the river Euphrates. During a Babylonian national feast, Cyrus' troops upstream of the Euphrates re-shaped the geography of the area and diverted the Euphrates, allowing Cyrus' soldiers to enter the city through the lowered water, and to conquer the outlying areas of the city, even as the Babylonians in the city centre remained entirely unaware of the breach of the city’s walls.

If we allow the word of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit to do the work of faith in us, we can begin to believe that, as God grasped the right hand of Cyrus to subdue nations before him, **so God can grasp, and can restrain, the right hand of today's rulers.**

In Isaiah 44, the Lord says of Cyrus, a pagan emperor, ***'he is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purposes.'*** And the beginning of the book of Ezra says the Lord ***"stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia"*** to permit the exiles of Judah to return to Jerusalem.

On the Cyrus Cylinder, discovered by archaeologists in 1879 and kept in the British Museum, Cyrus is credited with the repatriation of people living in exile in the Babylonian Empire. It might be stretching a point to call the Cyrus Cylinder the first human rights charter. But trusting that Cyrus' meteoric rise to power happened because Cyrus was God's anointed reassures us that the history of our world is God's history. Having faith that God appointed Cyrus to restore God's people to peace gives us the confidence, today, to pray for peace.

But we pray with realism, accepting that sometimes our prayers seem to go unanswered. Pete Greig, in his book *"How to pray"*, suggests that sometimes the reason God does not answer our prayers is that we live within God's war, in the middle of a spiritual battle. And sometimes it simply isn't God's will to answer our prayers, for reasons that we don't understand. Then the Psalms of lament become our prayer book, as we grapple with God. Then we just have to tell God, ***"yet not my will but yours be done"***.

Doing the work of faith means trusting that God can and does shape our history. And if we can trust that we serve the ***"living and true God"***, we can begin to let go of anxiety about what is to come. We can start to have the courage to live from day to day, trusting that God is present with us, and is with us in our sorrow over what is happening in the world.

Doing the work of faith helps us to **labour with love**. We show kindness and compassion for refugees and those who are afraid of repercussions and reprisals, even in our own city. We empathise with those afraid for the safety of their relatives.

We take care in how we speak, and how we engage with social media, recognising the difficulties of responding to a complex and fast-changing situation. We do all that we can to bring the love of God to all his children.

And **we hold onto our hope in Christ**

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray "***thy kingdom come***". We know our world is not yet ruled by its true King.

In our gospel reading we heard how the Pharisees plotted to entrap Jesus by asking him: "***is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?***"

A "yes" would alienate the religious Jews who hated their Roman occupiers. A "no" would paint Jesus as a revolutionary, threatening the uncomfortable status quo with the Roman occupying army, and making it easier for the Pharisees to get rid of Jesus.

By asking of the coin used for the tax "***whose head is this, and whose title?***" and getting the answer "***the emperor's***" - ***Roman*** coinage, with the ***Roman Emperor's*** head and title upon it - Jesus exposes the Jewish religious authorities' compromise on the requirement that only Jewish coinage be used in the Temple.

They have had to accept the encroachment of Roman authority into the heart of Jerusalem and Judaism. They live in a world compromised by not being in accordance with Jewish law.

And the world we live in today is a compromised world; a world that does not yet recognise its King. But even as we wait for the return of the King, we still "***serve a living and true God***".

We can hold to a steadfast hope in Christ.

Through the ups and downs of life in our compromised world, we stay **steady** as we **hold fast** to our hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Amen.**