

Creationist 2.0

Be Alert

27 November 2022

Lighting of the Hope Candle

Call to Worship – Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”

**Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.**

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

“May they prosper who love you.
**Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.”**

For the sake of my relatives and friends

I will say, “Peace be within you.”

**For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.**

O what a gift

Pat Uhl Howard

O what a gift, what a wonderful gift;
Who can tell the wonders of the Lord?
Let us open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts;
It is Christ the Lord, it is He!

In the stillness of the night,
When the world was asleep,
The Almighty Word leapt down
He came to Mary, he came to us
Christ came to the land of Galilee
Christ our Lord and our King!

He came to his people, the chosen race,
That his Father’s will would be known;
Lion of Judah, Light of the World,
Our Redeemer came to his own:
Christ our Lord and our King!

Now look around you and open your eyes;
Remember the Spirit is here.
Here within his Church, his people are one.
Look, the Lord is near:
Christ our Lord and our King!

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Children

Tinkling laughter

Heartbroken screams

Giggles and chuckles

Hunger-driven tantrums

Nerve-wracking silences

Unintelligible chatter

We are blessed and challenged by children

They see straight through our careful deceit

They mirror our deepest desires

They have no thought for how we see them

Only that we see them

They have no thought for how we hear them

Only that we feed and clean and clothe them

They have no thought for the past or the future

Only that we love them now, now, now

How might we learn from our children?

To have care to see those around us

To look to feed and clean and clothe those who need it

To love, love, love, now, now, now

For all the times we

look blankly,

hear dimly,

respond unfeelingly

to our world and those who fill it, we are sorry, God.

We bring our private confessions before you now...

May our God of all mercies cleanse us from our sins,

and restore us in his image,

to the praise and glory of his name,

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Notices

The Peace

Reading Romans 13:11-14

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; ¹³ let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Reflection

I want to begin by thanking everyone for your feedback on the last few weeks, and in particular for your comments and encouragement on Creating Opposes Evil. It seems we are going to need to return to the topic for a deeper look at some stage.

I thought, for the weeks of advent, we could do a mini-series leading in to Christmas. I've titled it, 'Be,' for short and our themes for the next four weeks are: Be alert, Be fruitful, Be prepared, and Be bold. The Johnson homegroup will be leading the Be bold service.

We will be getting back into Created to Creators in the New Year.

Today. What an interesting reading. Those who like to know exactly where they stand love readings like this because it seems so clear and obvious. No revelling and drunkenness, no debauchery and licentiousness, no quarrelling and jealousy. It's easy, we just have to live honourably as in the day. There we go, sermon over.

Except, as we all know, it's just not that easy. If it was we wouldn't be coming back to it again and again as the centuries pass. The religious right of the world would have Trump and his mini-me's in office all around the world and they would be forcing people to do as they were instructed, much the same as the Pharisees wanted so long ago. Perhaps, coming up to Christmas it is a healthy reminder for us of the reason we need to have a personal relationship with Jesus. So, let's dig in to our reading a little and try and get a sense of how we can take value from it for today.

Let's begin with a little context. The Christians in Rome at the time of Paul's writing were convinced that Jesus was going to return at any moment. For them, knowing the time meant they had to be ready for Jesus' imminent return. As a general rule it is healthy for us to keep short accounts with God and look to be prepared for Jesus' return. I think too there is wisdom in the saying that we should plan as if Jesus will not return in our lifetime and live as if he will return this afternoon. Paul's urgency in this passage is a reflection of the idea that Jesus might return this afternoon. That doesn't make it wrong. It does help us to understand his mindset.

Notice how he talks about night being far gone and the day near, works of darkness compared with armour of light and living in the day. The contrast of dark and light, night and day is designed to get our attention focussed. Then comes his main point. Live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Wow! What is going on here? What is Paul reacting to that he feels the need to write in this way?

Remember he is writing to the Roman church. The Roman Empire at this time was at the peak of its powers. It was also beginning to experience a ruling class that had moved a long way from the ideals of the republic that had been formed so many years previously. The behaviour of the wealthy was becoming increasingly identified with these practices and numerous historians have noted the impact they had on the eventual fall of the Empire. There is a sense here of the idea that there is no such thing as a free lunch. The elite were beginning to spend beyond their means, both economically and ethically.

Paul challenges the church to examine its behaviour in this light and not be caught going down the same dark alleyways. Putting on the Lord Jesus Christ didn't mean they were to become stern, frowning do-gooders. It meant they were to consider how their behaviour reflected on their faith.

Here is where I think it becomes contentious within the church. The temptation is to turn these 'don't dos' into strict rules – like the Pharisees expecting you to give a tenth of your dill and mint. It just wasn't the point. The point Paul was trying to get across was that they needed to live honourably. And living honourably can mean adhering to different rules in different places and times. Did it mean they couldn't have fun? Not at all. Not allowed to dance? Of course not. But what about cellphones and rock concerts? What about violent movies and questionable economic practices? Live honourably,

says Paul. The rest is a list of examples of less honourable behaviour. It is not exhaustive, nor is it essential, just possible examples. Our responsibility is to be alert to how we live, how we behave with the purpose of putting on Jesus Christ. What I am trying to get across here is that living honourably is not a matter of following some rules. It requires us to engage our brains and to think about what we are doing and how it affects others and ourselves. For example, it could mean things like not drinking alcohol in some circumstances and it being a perfectly reasonable practice in others. Or dancing in one moment and not in another. When we take time to think about how to live honourably in our context we will be ready, no matter the time of Christ's return.

Open the eyes of my heart

Paul Baloche

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord

Open the eyes of my heart

I want to see You

I want to see You

To see You high and lifted up

Shining in the light of Your glory

Pour out Your power and love

As we sing holy, holy, holy

Holy, holy, holy

We cry holy, holy, holy

You are holy, holy, holy

I want to see you

Reading Matthew 24:36-44

³⁶ "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Reflection

While part of being alert is bound up in living honourably and well, another part of it is all about being observant. 1 Chronicles 12:32 speaks of the Sons of Issachar who understood the times. They were alert to what was happening in the world around them and thought about what it meant and how best to respond. It is just as important to understand the times today as it was in the time of King David.

A quick note here. We are not talking about the end-times prophets and the end of the world prophets who encourage people to sell all they have and stand on a mountain to await the return of Christ. Nor are we talking about the Nostradamus' who, according to some, made all sorts of predictions about the future of the world. No, we are talking about looking around us and watching what is happening. We are talking about listening through all the opposing versions of fake news for the truth of what is happening. We watch the sky and we watch our feet. We try not to be carried away by the latest buzz or the loudest voice. We understand that wisdom is found in many councillors and should we realise they are all singing the same tune we try to find some who will give a counterpoint.

Listen to this story. It's a little long, but I think it makes the point rather well. In it we have some prophets who know what the king wants to hear and tells him exactly that. At the insistence of Jehoshaphat, a single naysayer is brought in. Here is the story.

⁵ But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, "Inquire first for the word of the LORD." ⁶ Then the Ahab gathered the prophets together, about four hundred of them, and said to them, "Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?" They said, "Go up; for the LORD will give it into the hand of the king." ⁷ But Jehoshaphat said, "Is there no other prophet of the LORD here of whom we may inquire?" ⁸ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is still one other by whom we may inquire of the LORD, Micaiah son of Imlah; but I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favourable about me, but only disaster." Jehoshaphat said, "Let the king not say such a thing." ⁹ Then the king of Israel summoned an officer and said, "Bring quickly Micaiah son of Imlah."

¹³ The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, “Look, the words of the prophets with one accord are favourable to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favourably.” ¹⁴ But Micaiah said, “As the LORD lives, whatever the LORD says to me, that I will speak.”

¹⁵ When he had come to the king, the king said to him, “Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we refrain?” He answered him, “Go up and triumph; the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.” ¹⁶ But the king said to him, “How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?” ¹⁷ Then Micaiah said, “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd; and the LORD said, ‘These have no master; let each one go home in peace.’ ”

¹⁸ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy anything favourable about me, but only disaster?”

¹⁹ Then Micaiah said, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. ²⁰ And the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ Then one said one thing, and another said another, ²¹ until a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’ ²² ‘How?’ the LORD asked him. He replied, ‘I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ Then the LORD said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it.’ ²³ So you see, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has decreed disaster for you.”

We are heading into Christmas 2022. In the world around us there are wars and rumours of wars, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. In many ways nothing has changed since the times of Ahab and Jehoshaphat. The call to be alert isn't about pinning down a time or a place – Jesus told us directly that no-one knows. The call to be alert is about keeping our eyes and ears open, about thinking deeply on what is happening around us, and curating our behaviour so that when Christ returns he will find us ready. In the meantime, we eat, drink, marry, give in marriage, each action tuned to living honourably when and where we are right now.

We Pray

God of old times and end times, of before time and beyond time, of then and to come, you are also the God of Now.

You are present with us, now.

You see our hearts, now.

You know our thoughts, now.

You see our struggle to understand what is going on in the world around us.

None of it fits what we know, what we have seen, what we have learnt.

Yet here it is. Now.

Help us to understand our times and teach us to live honourably. Gift us wisdom to be your hands and feet to those around us who need a sense of Jesus in their lives, even if they don't recognise or acknowledge it. Let us be alert in a world that desperately needs more lerts. In Jesus' love and mercy we pray. Amen.

Shine, Jesus, shine

Graham Kendrick

Lord, the light of Your love is shining

In the midst of the darkness, shining

Jesus, light of the world, shine upon us

Set us free by the truth You now bring us

Shine on me, shine on me

Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father's glory

Blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire

Flow, river, flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy

Send forth Your word, Lord, and let there be light

Lord, I come to Your awesome presence

From the shadows into Your radiance

By the blood, I may enter Your brightness

Search me, try me, consume all my darkness

Shine on me, shine on me

As we gaze on your kingly brightness

So our faces display your likeness

Ever changing from glory to glory

Mirrored here may our lives tell your story

Shine on me, shine on me

Offering

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/>

God of peace and justice, in the past year we have once again witnessed the fruits of war: lives cut short, children made orphans, homes devastated, and hearts broken. We pray to see the day that Isaiah saw in his heart, when swords are pounded into ploughshares. These gifts we give this morning, may they be used to make human hearts ready for peace and for the reign of your son. In his holy name, we pray. Amen.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Indonesia. For the families of the hundreds killed, for the thousands of injured, for the many more without homes, food, running water. For the workers delivering aid, digging out, rehoming people. For aid agencies rushing to provide already stretched resources to yet another disaster.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Ukraine. For the millions of people living in freezing temperatures with little or no power. For the innumerable families mourning lost loved ones. For people coming to terms with the brutality of occupying Russian forces. For soldiers on both sides of the conflict forced to shoot at each other and, in some instances, at civilians, for the sake of politicians hiding in safe bunkers.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Oamaru. For the families facing a bleak Christmas filled only with the struggle to make ends meet. Relying on the goodwill of others for any semblance of Christmas spirit. Hungry children, weary adults, frustration growing and turning to violence.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

For the services that keep us safe over Christmas. The fire crews, paid and volunteer, the ambulance crews, the police, the road safety and maintenance crews, hospital and rest home staff.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Ourselves. For families spread around the country and around the world. For the changes age forces upon us. For the loss of things precious to us, including our health and independence. For the grief that is an inescapable part of life. For those who hold us close.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

All these things we pray through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus, who taught us to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, holy be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen

Angels from the realms of glory

James Montgomery

Angels from the realms of glory

Wing your flight over all the earth

Ye, who sang creation's story

Now proclaim Messiah's birth

Come and worship, come and worship

Worship Christ the newborn King

Shepherds in the fields abiding

Watching over your flocks by night

God with man is now residing

Yonder shines the Infant light

Come and worship, come and worship

Worship Christ the newborn King

Sages leave your contemplations

Brighter visions beam afar

Seek the great Desire of nations

Ye have seen His natal star

Come and worship, come and worship

Worship Christ the newborn King

Saints before the alter bending
Watching long in hope and fear
Suddenly the Lord, descending,
In His temple shall appear
Come and worship, come and worship
Worship Christ the newborn King

Benediction and Grace

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the Love of God,
and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all, now and forevermore. Amen.

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