

Creationist 2.0

Be Fruitful

04 December 2022

Call to Worship – Psalm 72

May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.

**May God defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.**

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.

Blessed be his glorious name forever;
**may his glory fill the whole earth.
Amen and Amen.**

O little town of Bethlehem

Phillips Brooks

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by;
yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary,
and, gathered all above
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wond'ring love.
O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King
and peace to all the earth.

How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts

the blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still
the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray,
cast out our sin and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Immanuel!

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Thank you, God, for the amazing world we live in

We don't really understand it

Some say science can explain it

For some things science is very good

For others, not so much

Some say religion can explain it

For some things religion is very good

For others, not so much

Perhaps we need those things we don't understand

To transport us into a place of wonder, of curiosity, of imagination

Where you meet us amid joy and awe

It's that same joy and awe we experience when we ponder the Christmas story

The how is deliciously unexplored

The why invites us to delve into stories old and the new

Forgive us for those times we pretend to know it all

Missing the joy and awe that invites us into your presence

Forgive us for our sometimes jaded dismissal of the wonders of Christmas

Teach us to make space for the indescribable, the ineffable

Space where you will meet us amid joy and awe

We bring our private confessions before you now...

Our God fulfils his promises and is true to his word.

We have confessed our sins.

God has forgiven us,

because Christ died for us. Amen.

Notices

The Peace

Reading

Romans 15:4-13

⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷ Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

As it is written,

“Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name”;

¹⁰ and again he says,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”;

¹¹ and again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him”;

¹² and again Isaiah says,

“The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Reflection

We are heading into that time of year I always look forward to, when the trees begin to bear their fruit and I can enjoy fresh apricots and cherries and nectarines and peaches and apples and... you get my drift. It is as if the trees have been preparing all year to provide a bounty of amazing tastes and textures all tailored to delight my palate and warm my belly. I think that after my garage it was the thing that excited me most about buying my house. There

were so many fruit trees with plenty of room for more to be added. In a way the house itself was something of a useful afterthought rather than the main event.

Today, I want to spend a little time thinking out loud about the fruit trees and how they might help us think about this reading from Romans. One of the interesting aspects of the reading is how Paul talks to the Roman Christians about something that has been in process for a very long time. God is confirming the promises given to the Patriarchs through the person of Jesus. Consider that for a moment. Abraham lived some 2000 years before Jesus. Isaiah lived around 700 years before Jesus. The promises made to them and to all the other men and women who looked forward to Jesus took a long time to be fulfilled. It wouldn't be unreasonable for Abraham or Isaiah to suggest on their deathbeds that God hadn't come through for them, that the promises hadn't be fulfilled.

I feel a little like that about my apricot tree this year. It had a good crop of blossoms. It is covered in leaves. There is almost no fruit. The promise of loads of apricots hasn't been fulfilled. Of course the cycle of seasons is far shorter for a fruit tree than it is for God's purpose, but there is an underlying sense of disappointment when the tree doesn't perform as I would hope and I am left wanting. How much more so for Abraham or Isaiah.

Without doubt there are a host of reasons for my apricot tree to be bereft of fruit this year. Does that mean it is no good? Should I immediately go out and cut it down? Of course not. In all likelihood it will bear loads of fruit next year. In the same way, God had reasons for waiting, apparently without fruit, until it was time for Jesus to be born. Did that mean that Abraham and Isaiah and all the other God-believers should give up and go home because it seemed as though God wasn't bearing fruit? Not at all.

Which leads to an important point here. Disappointment. I know without doubt that everyone of us has experienced disappointment when it has seemed that God hasn't answered our prayers. When there has seemed to be no fruit no matter how much effort we have expended. It is likely that there are some here whose children have decided they don't want to follow the faith of their parents. That's a deeply distressing experience. It is likely that many are disappointed that the church they grew up with, that has become a valued part of their lives seems to be fading away. It brings deep and abiding regret.

Perhaps there are some who have lost loved ones they have prayed and prayed for leaving a sense of frustration and defeat.

These things are, I suspect, a part of being human. Has God abandoned us to our distress? Is our fruitlessness a sign of failure or ruin? I don't think so. You may have noticed that the book of Psalms is full of stories of distress and loss, of sorrow and hopelessness. Listen to these few examples:

Psalm 3

O LORD, how many are my foes!

Many are rising against me;

² many are saying to me,

"There is no help for you in God.

Psalm 38

I am utterly spent and crushed;

I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

Psalm 55

My heart is in anguish within me,

the terrors of death have fallen upon me.

⁵ Fear and trembling come upon me,

and horror overwhelms me.

And here is the thing. Even in despair and lament the Psalmist experiences fruitfulness and an abiding sense of joy and peace (it's worth noting here that joy is not the same as happiness, but we might look deeper into that another time). Listen to what invariably follows these words of lament.

Psalm 55

Cast your burden on the LORD,

and he will sustain you

Psalm 63

So I will bless you as long as I live;

I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

Psalm 143

Teach me to do your will,

for you are my God.

Let your good spirit lead me

on a level path.

I suspect you have heard it before, but being Christian doesn't mean that life will turn out to be all chocolate and roses. By the same token, neither is it a morass of disasters and failures. Things go right and things go wrong. And this is the point I want us to carry over – fruitfulness is not about what goes right or wrong. It is about learning to allow the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and discovering that no matter what seems to be going on we can still bless the Lord as long as we live and carry an abiding sense of joy and peace. That is what true fruitfulness looks like.

God rest ye merry gentlemen

Reading Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”³ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’ ”

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance.⁹ Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.¹⁰ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Reflection

Are there any vipers here today? Anyone? No-one fleeing from the wrath to come? John really lays it on thick here. And of course, we look back and think to ourselves that the Pharisees and Sadducees definitely had it coming. They were the evil schemers who would eventually insist that Jesus be hung on the cross. Bad, bad, bad!

Only, I wonder how different we really are to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They were the mainstream church of Jesus' day. They studied the Scriptures assiduously – likely far more deeply than most of us do. They endeavoured to follow the biblical rules and regulations as closely as possible. They were, in today's terms, fine, upstanding members of the church and the community. They wouldn't look out of place (their choice of clothing notwithstanding) in any church or council meeting or helping at the foodbank or with the local lion's club. To put it bluntly, they were you and me, only 2000 years ago.

Then Billy Graham came along, in the form of John the Baptist and began stirring things up. You need to get up from your seat, come down the front and confess your sins and ask Jesus to be Lord of your life. Don't think that anything you have done before will save you. Don't think that being a member of the church, serving on the Deacon's court, serving in the kitchen, cleaning the church, will save you. Don't think that being a longstanding member of the church – ever since Adam was the minister – will save you. You must bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Now, hang on just a moment. It's all well and good for you to say I need to bear fruit worthy of repentance. But what does that mean? I'm a good person. I do good things. I look out for the church. I help people. What's missing?

For that we need to take a short side trip to something else Isaiah said 700 years before Jesus.

Here is what it looks like to bear fruit worthy of repentance:

- bring good news to the oppressed,
- to bind up the brokenhearted,
- to proclaim liberty to the captives,
- and release to the prisoners;
- to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour,
- to comfort all who mourn;
- to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
- to give them a garland instead of ashes,

the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

So, John and Billy look at us and ask – ‘Here is the list, how are you doing?’ We could pull out the list of the Fruit of the Spirit, which is a distillation of Isaiah’s list and need to answer the same question. Measured by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, how are we doing?

I don’t know if the minister is supposed to confess these kinds of things, but I don’t think I would rate very highly on either list. Perhaps I am more like a Pharisee or a Sadducee than I would care to admit. Is it possible that if I were to turn up to be baptised by John, he would lump me in with the rest of the brood of vipers? Maybe.

Which leaves me to ask, ‘How do I go about bearing fruit worthy of repentance?’ Because I’m not terribly keen on the idea of being cut down and thrown into the fire.

I think there are two answers to begin with. The first is kind of easy in a way. By asking Jesus to be my friend and Saviour the bridge between me and God is restored and I come into relationship with God. As Paul wrote to the Romans: “If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” There we go, job done. Easy. Before I go, on, it really is that easy. There is truly nothing else between you and a personal relationship with God.

Yes. And. Or in the words of the TV salesperson: ‘But wait, there’s more!’ James asks us this: What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Ouch! This is, in a far gentler way, just as brutal as John’s insistence on bearing fruit. I spent some time thinking about this and I don’t think there is any way to make this easier. We can’t justify our inaction by saying, ‘It’s ok, I’m saved.’ It is true that by declaring that Jesus is Lord and believing in our hearts that God raised him from the dead we are saved. What I find myself asking is whether there is not so much a proof of declaration, but a co-requisite that in declaring and believing, our behaviour reflects the change. In other words – you should be able to see that I am a Christian through my behaviour. In other words – by my fruit I will be known. Whether that is from Isaiah’s list or the Fruit of the Spirit list doesn’t matter.

Heading into Christmas 2022 I think it is more important than ever before that we as Christians be recognisable by our fruit. There will be seasons for all of us when just like my apricot, the fruit is thin. But I know it is an apricot by the fruit it bears. May I, may you, may we, be known by the fruit we bear, this Christmas and into the future.

We Pray

Merciful God. Some among us are amazing, fruit bearing, trees of righteousness. Some of us struggle to push out a leaf sometimes. We can feel alternately overwhelmed and underwhelmed by our fruitfulness. Help us to bear each other up as we walk toward you, strengthening and being strengthened by those around us. Gift us wisdom to understand the struggles we face in bearing fruit, and grace to support and encourage as we can. Help us to be fruit bearers to your glory. Through Jesus, who bore fruit that we might live, we pray. Amen.

Way Maker

Offering

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

Our God, architect of this world and all others: we know you had a vision for all your creation to dwell together. With the creatures of the air, earth, and sea, you long for us to live in respect and with one another. We give this morning, understanding that we have denied you that desire. We ask you to help us use who we are and what we have to heal this abused and broken world. In Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

We pray for parents in drought-stricken Afghanistan without access to aid. In desperation to provide food, heat and clothes for their families, some are forced to sell their kidneys and other organs, and even very young daughters contrary to their own deeply held Islamic faith tradition. Fill us with generosity to support people like these around the world.

Then mercy and faithfulness will embrace,
righteousness and peace shall kiss.

We pray for those who are driven to migrate. Perhaps they are searching for an El Dorado that only exists half in myth and half in dream. All too often they desperately seek safety and security of food and water, freedom from terror or to a land safe from rising sea levels. We think particularly of the people of Kiribati and Tuvalu as their homes steadily disappear beneath the waves. May they find hope and welcome in other lands including our own.

Then mercy and faithfulness will embrace,
righteousness and peace shall kiss.

We pray for those suffering sadness and dislocation as they face lost jobs and reduced income while the reserve bank forces the economy into recession. The wealthy remain relatively untouched while those with less are ruthlessly ground down by economic terrorism. Give us eyes to see how we can help and support those who struggle this Christmas.

Then mercy and faithfulness will embrace,
righteousness and peace shall kiss.

We ask a blessing on your generous servants, who go the second mile, give without looking for reward, gladly serve without praise, and who see their own gifts as a bonus to be shared.

Then mercy and faithfulness will embrace,
righteousness and peace shall kiss.

We pray for those we love, those who are close, and those far away. Those we have good relationship with and those with whom we struggle to connect. Those we have lost over the last year and those we have welcomed. Help us to build fruitful relationships over this advent season.

Then mercy and faithfulness will embrace,
righteousness and peace shall kiss.

All these things we pray through the One who came as a servant and who taught us to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who is 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

Love came down at Christmas

Christina Georgina Rossetti

Love came down at Christmas,
love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas;
star and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, Love divine;
worship we our Jesus,
but wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token;
love be yours and love be mine;
love to God and others,
love for plea and gift and sign.

Benediction and Grace

As we go on from here, may we be fruitful in all we do, not to outdo one another, but to the glory of God...

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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