

Prelude: *Whatever my God ordains is right*, Johann Pachabel

Words of welcome

Whether we gather in person or in other ways, whenever we worship God we remember that giving him glory is our main purpose in life. So we praise God as we sing or listen to the hymn

Hymn: Praise, I will praise you, Lord

Prayer

Lord God, we come to you in praise and worship. Any time that we turn to you it is an act of worship, of saying that we need and love and trust you. Any time we come into your presence by our coming we honour you, and your desire that we should know you with us always. We praise you because of the wonder of your ways: you do things that we would never think of, you work in ways that we cannot understand until we look back and see how you have woven life together to make something that we had not dreamed of. We praise you most of all for Jesus: the sending of your Son to love us and die for us and bring us into life in your presence. Your way is a way of love that goes beyond our imagining, and we thank and praise you for it.

As we live through difficult days we ask that you would keep us in a spirit of praise and worship, lifting our hearts and lives to you for your guidance and blessing.

And hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

Reading: Ezra 3:10-13

Over the past few weeks we have been thinking about exile, exile for the people of Israel and our own sense of exile that we are living through. We have thought about lamentation, when we are just sad about what we have lost – whether it is a home and a country or whether it is human contact and socialising, work, travel, normality and well as those we lose through the ending of lives. And we have thought about God's instructions to the exiles, to buckle down and get on with building a life where they find themselves and about the promise that God is always with us and we need not be in exile from him. We have thought too about the promise that it is not forever.

And today we read from the book of Ezra, which is one account of what life was like for those who could and did eventually return from exile. We are waiting for the government to tell us that it is safe and permitted for us to do certain things – travel, meet, work, open the churches and so on. The Jews in exile in Babylon were also waiting for official permission, in their case from the king, to return from their exile and resume life in their land. And just as it won't happen all at once for us, so it didn't happen all at once for them.

The book of Ezra tells us that the first of the exiles came back during the time of King Cyrus of Babylon. They did a certain amount of re-building, but then there was a new king, Artaxerxes, and he was prevailed upon to stop this activity, and persuaded that if the Jews rebuilt they would also rebel. So there was a hiatus, though those who had returned did not have to go back into exile. And then later, under king Darius, a new group of returnees got

going again. And with this group was Ezra the scribe, a priest who would teach and remind the people of how they were supposed to worship God – because in 70 years of exile a lot had been forgotten.

The passage we read today comes from the time when the first returnees were beginning to rebuild the temple. When the foundations were re-laid – because the place had been entirely ruined – there was great praise and thanksgiving expressed to God. There was singing and dancing – and there were people who wept. Old people, who remembered the first temple which had been destroyed, who remembered being there with their families who had died in the fighting or in exile, or from whom they had been separated and never knew what happened to them. People who couldn't help but think about all the difficulties of the exile, and the times they had had their hopes dashed – and now, here they were. It was an emotional time, this time of return and rebuilding and not all the emotions were joyful.

Psalm 126 remembers it this way:

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion*

*We were like those who dream.*

*Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy;*

*Then it was said among the nations,*

*“The Lord has done great things for them.”*

*The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.*

We rejoiced, says the Psalm. And they did. But they also wept because of memories. Emotions can be surprising sometimes. Ties of family and ties of place can bring out the oddest responses in us sometimes. But these ties matter. They are why people want to be married or have a child baptised where generations of their family have done similar things. And the places where generations have bowed in prayer, in happy thanksgiving or urgent petition or bitter sorrow, such places can be very important indeed. And the temple was all of that to the returned exiles of Jerusalem. And so the return and re-establishment of the temple was emotional.

Today we stand at the very beginning of unlock-down. We still don't know when we can gather together as God's people again, or what restrictions will be necessary and what changes to how we conduct a service or worship, when we do. If we are to draw parallels with the Jewish exiles, we have not left Babylon yet, but perhaps king Cyrus has ascended the throne, and knowing he is a compassionate man, we have some hope. We maybe dare not specify our hope yet, far less put dates to it, but we have hope that there will be a return. And when there is, will we feel like we are dreaming and shout for joy, or will we look at what we can and can't do together in worship and feel inclined to lament again and weep?

We have hope. One of the signs of hope is the rainbow, which we see displayed in so many ways in homes around us. As you walk through the neighbourhood you can see many children's drawings of rainbows stuck in windows. Or you may see, especially in Kingussie, colourful crocheted rainbows, sold to raise money for the community food table. Or rainbows painted on small stones left around the places where people walk, in Glen Banchor or by the Spey. And for the weeks of this lockdown I have marvelled that the sign for hope is the Biblical one, taken from the ending of the story of the flood. We have gone through much and there is a long road still to travel, but we travel with God and so we have hope.

Hymn: This is a day of new beginnings

Reading: Romans 5:1-8

The Apostle Paul knew about finding hope in the midst of difficulties. The letter which we have read from, the letter to the Romans, was probably written during what we know of as Paul's third missionary journey, when he was spending time in Corinth. By that time he had been over land and sea to many communities. He had been hounded out of town more than once, arrested and jailed, threatened, encouraged and discouraged. And he has learned about hope, that it does not diminish because of suffering and setbacks but it flourishes in such soil.

He says that he and his companions can boast about their suffering – not because suffering is a good thing in itself – that would just be masochism – but because they have learned that their suffering leads them to develop endurance, and that when they develop endurance their characters grow, and that a character shaped by endurance is one which is hopeful. And hope, he says does not disappoint us – why? *Because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

Talk of the Holy Spirit takes us forward to Pentecost, next Sunday, when we celebrate the giving of God's presence in his Spirit. For now let us note that the hope which God's presence gives us is a hope that does not disappoint us. Paul is not talking about mere wishful thinking here, the way we often think of hope. We say "I hope that one day I may see the Grand Canyon, (or the Taj Mahal, or the Victoria Falls, or whatever) and it is really a wish that we have that we have no certainty of ever having fulfilled. Pauls says that our hope does not disappoint us.

He is, of course, not talking about earthly hopes, even the hopes we have for the resumption of normal life and of regular worship together. Paul is talking about the ultimate hope that we have as disciples of Christ: the hope of sharing the glory of God. And he knows that this hope is certain because Christ has died for us, proving once and for all that God loves us. And so any suffering is not important. Anything we have to endure is a secondary matter. Suffering and endurance – whether of physical pains or emotional wounds, of illness or uncertainty, of loss or of sorrow – suffering and endurance are only important as they lead us to the sure hope of sharing in God's glory.

And after all, as children of God that is what we are all about – about promoting the glory of God, not of ourselves. That Psalm which was written about the return from exile, Psalm 126, says,

*Then it was said among the nations,*

*"The Lord has done great things for them."*

*The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.*

The people rejoiced because the nations around saw that it was *God* who had brought his people back, *God* who had restored them, *God* who was active in their good fortune. And that is how it should be. As Christians we are not about promoting ourselves, but about being mirrors of the light of God so that he is seen as the source of all blessing and goodness and love – which is what he is. Our hope is to share in God's glory and that means that our desire is not to find recognition for ourselves or for the institution which we call the church, but what we want is that people should see our God, who loves his creation and sent his Son to die for us, so proving his goodness and love.

So as we wait in exile, for our own return and time of rebuilding, as we face and expect challenges and changes, we do it with the prayer that people may see that goodness of God and that the hope that we share with our community would be rooted in the realisation of God's love.

Hymn: All my hope on God is founded

Before we come to God in prayer, may I remind you that each day this week, since last Thursday, I am inviting you to join with me in prayer at 7 p.m. Praying for God's Kingdom

to come in the lives of people we know; asking that they may come to know God's glory for themselves.

Now let us pray:

#### Prayer

Lord God, as we live through these difficult times help us to remember that our hope is founded and rooted in you, and nowhere else. As we do a lot of waiting for one thing or another to change, help us to remember that our calling is to give you the glory that is only yours. God of all love, we wait for you with hope.

We thank you, Lord God, for the things which give us joy. We thank you for the turning of the seasons, for the time to watch the plants and gardens grow, for the privilege of living among so much beauty, here in the highlands. We thank you for the ways we have of keeping in touch with those we miss, even if it seems a second best. And we ask that you keep us grateful at times when we might be inclined to grumble. God of all love, we wait for you with hope.

We pray, heavenly Father, for those who are ill with this terrible virus, locally and around the world. As we contemplate the momentous task of seeking to rebuild and restart societies which have been halted, we ask for vision and faith, for ourselves and for those who must make decisions. And we pray for those whose lives are devastated, by death and disease; by loss of jobs and relationships; by hopes dashed and a future made uncertain. God of all love, we wait for you with hope.

We pray for your Church, Lord God, and in these days of preparation before the celebration of Pentecost we would pray with churches around the world for your kingdom to come in the lives of the people among whom we live, our neighbours, colleagues, family and friends. God of all love, we wait for you with hope.

Hear all our prayers, today and always, and rekindle your hope within us. We pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Because our calling is to worship and praise and show forth God's glory, we end by singing or listening to the hymn

Hymn: Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

#### Benediction

Grace, mercy and peace

From God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit,

Rest upon you and remain with you now and forever. Amen

Postlude: Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, by Johann Walther