

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship, these words are for our thinking today: 'Take off your shoes! **We are standing on holy ground.** Shake off the dust! **We are ready to start afresh.** Let us worship God and receive Christ's teachings, that we may be renewed and strengthened to share God's love with the world.'

Hymn CH4 166 – Lord of all hopefulness

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray;

Gracious God, Heavenly Father, we thank you and praise you this morning for life and all we have to enjoy it with. We praise you for the prophets of old listening intently for your voice in their time and speaking up for your creative will and ways of caring love. We praise you most of all for your son Jesus Christ our Lord, whom you sent that we might see your face and learn your wisdom through all he told and taught. We praise you for your holy, healing Spirit waking us to new ways and wisdom in this world.

Gracious God, we come before you lifting up our hearts and minds to your love. Some of us are glad and happy. But some of us are bowed down with cares, fearful to fall on their life's journey.

Lord we know that at times the way we travel is not what you have planned for us. Some of our thoughts, words and deeds do not tell your story of loving you and loving each other. Some of our living has hurt others and ourselves.

Forgive us, merciful God and lift us up again.

Forgive us, when we get stuck in negative thinking, are judgmental or unkind.

Forgive us, when we are expecting all and giving little.

Forgive us, when we do not listen to your challenge and call for us but run from you with excuses.

Teach us, good Lord your ways and lead us on this life's journey that we may reach life in all its fullness. Open our ears, help us to see and to act as your disciples should and rejoice together in your kingdom ways.

Teach us now Gracious God, for we are here to learn from you, giver of all life and love. This we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that 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.

Reading: 2 Samuel 5: 1 – 5, 9 – 10 (taken from The Good News Translation)

David Becomes King of Israel and Judah

5 Then all the tribes of Israel went to David at Hebron and said to him, "We are your own flesh and blood. ²In the past, even when Saul was still our king, you led the people of Israel in battle, and the Lord promised you that you would lead his people and be their ruler." ³So all the leaders of Israel came to King David at Hebron. He made a sacred alliance with them, they anointed him, and he became king of Israel. ⁴David was thirty years old when he became king, and he ruled for forty years. ⁵He ruled in Hebron over Judah for seven and a half years, and in Jerusalem over all Israel and Judah for thirty-three years.

⁹After capturing the fortress, David lived in it and named it "David's City." He built the city around it, starting at the place where land was filled in on the east side of the hill. ¹⁰He grew stronger all the time, because the Lord God Almighty was with him.

Reading: Mark 6: 1 – 13

Jesus Is Rejected at Nazareth

6 Jesus left that place and went back to his hometown, followed by his disciples. ²On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue. Many people were there; and when they heard him, they were all amazed. "Where did he get all this?" they asked. "What wisdom is this that has been given him? How does he perform miracles?" ³Isn't he the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother

of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon? Aren't his sisters living here?" And so they rejected him.

⁴ Jesus said to them, "Prophets are respected everywhere except in their own hometown and by their relatives and their family."

⁵ He was not able to perform any miracles there, except that he placed his hands on a few sick people and healed them. ⁶ He was greatly surprised, because the people did not have faith.

Jesus Sends Out the Twelve Disciples

Then Jesus went to the villages around there, teaching the people. ⁷ He called the twelve disciples together and sent them out two by two. He gave them authority over the evil spirits ⁸ and ordered them, "Don't take anything with you on the trip except a walking stick—no bread, no beggar's bag, no money in your pockets. ⁹ Wear sandals, but don't carry an extra shirt." ¹⁰ He also told them, "Wherever you are welcomed, stay in the same house until you leave that place. ¹¹ If you come to a town where people do not welcome you or will not listen to you, leave it and shake the dust off your feet. That will be a warning to them!"

¹² So they went out and preached that people should turn away from their sins. ¹³ They drove out many demons, and rubbed olive oil on many sick people and healed them.

Hymn CH4 448 – Lord, the light of your love is shining, (Shine, Jesus, shine)

Sermon – 'Rose-tinted Spectacles'

'History is written by the victors' is a quote which has been attributed to Winston Churchill, and you could argue that it applies to what we find in today's Old Testament reading. For David is now king over the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. It was not a simple coronation. To get to this stage, there has been a horrendous civil war, people have changed sides, families have either been divided or destroyed, until at the last, David emerges as the victor.

At the beginning of his story, David had been the insignificant eighth son, a genuine nobody, to whom power had been given. Today we find him as king over all he surveyed, standing in his newly united kingdom and he creates a new capital, the old hilltop town of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the place where Abraham had prepared to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. The place where the Temple would be built and where Jesus decades later would overturn the tables of the market traders. Yet, history is written by the victors.

This quote can be applied to the Bible as well as to our secular history. For, today we find a story which will pique the interest of those who believe in a theology of success. People who believe that if God is on their 'side', they will have success, power and even wealth. That thought reminds me of television preachers. You know what I mean, they stand in front of audiences and make audacious claims about being able to heal diseases such as coronavirus, if (and it's a big if) you donate money to them. Across the bottom of the screen are graphics for banks and credit-card companies.

On the face of it, our Old Testament reading suggests that the theology of success might be true. Yet, the story behind the story is completely different and far closer to the uncertain and darker reality of our modern world. To read these few verses, is to be left with the feeling that everything had been plain-sailing, a 'dawdle', that God had been right there, standing shoulder to shoulder with David. That everything that had happened, had happened the way that God Himself had intended. No flaws. No hiccups. No rethinks. Just one long, steady progression to David becoming king of all he surveyed in his new capital city of Jerusalem, the City of David. You could argue that this is history of the 'rose-tinted spectacle' variety.

For this is history, written decades after the event, more than likely during a time when Israel's fortunes were low. So, when the writers look back, they need a time when everything was perfect and wonderful. When all events were seen in a positive light. To events that can be seen through rose-tinted spectacles. One commentator suggests that, *'if God was with David, this seems to have been evident only in hindsight.'* This is an interesting observation, as most of David's story was edited together from materials written down whilst the Israelites were

in exile. Therefore, during a time when 'rose-tinted spectacles' were very much in vogue.

In reality, David rose to power in a world as confusing and violent as any of the time, including our own. David took advantage of what he saw and fought for the power he eventually gained. This is a lesson about building a theology of success based on stories written long after the actual event and in circumstances which idolise the past. David's smooth transition is simply a looking back on what was believed to be a golden era. A golden era that never truly existed and to a time when God's hand in human affairs was as unclear and mysterious as it seems today.

With that in mind, is there not a danger that we always want to write over the pain and the hurt of the past by creating a theology that comes more from the ambition of the victors than from the Love of God. However, if we read our Bibles, we find a story of seeking God in the reality of this world and then attempting to bear witness to a God Who works in the world through a different set of principles and values.

Now, Jesus also had to contend with those who viewed the past through 'rose-tinted spectacles'. We have the perfect example of this in our reading from Mark's Gospel. Jesus has been healing, preaching and teaching around the Sea of Galilee and his travels take Him to His hometown of Nazareth. Perhaps, people had heard of all that He had been doing in other places. Perhaps, Jesus had returned home, as it was simply His turn to teach in the Synagogue on the Sabbath. Yet, when He spoke, the people could not, or did not, believe what they were hearing.

The Nazarenes had constructed a past that suited their present. Through their rose-tinted spectacles, they viewed Jesus as an upstart. Wasn't He only the local carpenter's son? How could He suddenly now speak with authority and wisdom. In a way that unsettled their notion of Who He was and what He was capable of? If this had happened in Scotland, the locals might have looked at each other and said, 'I ken his faither'. Jesus burst out of the rose-tinted past into which He

had been put by His contemporaries and others. This edgy, challenging, commanding individual no longer fits their image of what they thought was right and proper. The people have a view of the past that suits them and they are not prepared to accept this new present that Jesus proclaimed to them. Familiarity has bred contempt.

Here was 'little Jesus', the boy Who had grown up around the corner with Mary and His siblings. Here was Jesus 'the carpenter', who had made them lovely tables and benches, with high standard finishes and now He is a wise Prophet of God. How they groaned, for this didn't fit the view of their rose-tinted spectacles. The nerves have been well and truly struck. Why do they not have before them the Jesus they had always known, the Jesus Who is no different from them. So, when Jesus starts to preach with wisdom and perform healings, they could not see beyond their rose-tinted view. They would not listen. They would not believe.

The writers of Israel's history, and its great King David had them: rose-tinted spectacles, glossing over the awkward bits of history. Airbrushing out the chapters that did not look good, or shiny, or positive. The Nazarenes had them: unable to see anything new or different because it would upset their status quo or even challenge their long-held prejudices and assumptions.

This morning, I wonder, what about us? When have we, when do we put on those rose-tinted spectacles? When do we choose not to 'see' things that are inconvenient in our own lives, or the lives of others? What do we gloss over, edit out, or sweep under the carpet? When do we compare the present to the past unfavourably, because the realities of today do not suit or match our perceptions or prejudices? Why do we hanker, after a past, that, if we were to look at more closely, would very rarely be everything that we assumed it would be?

One former Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, referred to this as 'The Downton Abbey Syndrome'. What he meant was that we all look to the past and assume we will be the Dowager Countess, or Lord

Grantham, or certainly 'upstairs', when, in all likelihood, we would have been toiling away downstairs in the kitchens with Mrs Patmore or working with Mr Carson.

Although it may not sound like it, I love history. Yet, wearing rose-tinted spectacles distorts the past and I worry that it distracts the present and will limit the future. It may be uncomfortable, it will certainly be challenging; but looking at everything that has gone before us and then have the boldness to imagine what the future could be like, surely, that is the way people of faith, should live? We must stop longing for a past long gone and urgently begin working towards creating the future. We Scottish Presbyterians are sometimes nostalgia fanatics!

We hanker back to golden ages that did not quite exist, the way we fondly imagine. We recall when Churches were full, yet the peak Church of Scotland membership was reached in 1956, and it has been reclining ever since. Now, I'm not saying that we should just ignore the past. What I am saying is we should not be imprisoned in the past or by the past. For God calls us to live in the present and to face the future with confidence and in faith. In our personal lives. In our Church life. In our national life.

Are there any areas in your life where 'nostalgia reigns' because you would rather not see what you really know is there, because if you saw it, you would have to deal with it? Where are the areas in our nation's life, where we are avoiding some home-truths? Economy, Coronavirus, Brexit, Poverty, Substance Abuse, Racial and Religious discrimination, Immigration. Can Scotland claim to be an open and welcoming society, when sometimes we are anything but?

Are there areas in the Church's life, locally or nationally, where our refusal to address the need for thoughtful change, or even courageous change and an unwillingness to let attitudes go, on a variety of subjects, are now holding us back, keeping us chained, from being the people that God wants us to be? It's a sobering thought, that in some areas of the world, the Church has been called to serve, have moved on more positively than we have as a Church. That it took

a global pandemic, to open all of our eyes to new possibilities and the urgent need for reform. Before 2020, the Church was stuck in the rut of fear, uncertainty, stubbornness, because we had grown far too comfortable with the way things are, rather than the way they could or should be. A bit like the Nazarenes who could not see Jesus for Who He was, let alone listen to what He had to say. Let's hope the Church can step forward in 2021.

However, it does not have to be all doom and gloom. There is Good News: it does not have to remain this way. Through all that has happened so far this year, the good, the bad and everything in between, the bright light of Jesus, still shines. The bright light of Jesus shines through rose-tinted spectacles, and lets us see clearly His world, and our world, the way it really is. The Good News is that the bright light of Jesus illuminates the past and the present honestly and then shines into the future, so that we may venture into it hopefully.

Friends, it is time to take those spectacles off. It is time to see the world is not rose-hued, but multicoloured and full of vibrancy, texture and contrast. It is time to look at the world and the Church, through the eyes of Jesus, and attempt the things that Jesus would do to make this world the fairer, gentler, more open, more honest and more welcoming place it needs to be. It is time to bin those glasses.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hymn– Jesus, what a beautiful name

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray;

God of all, big and small, You created the universe and launched its dance of life. All growing and slowing, waxing and waning, everything strong and everything fragile and weak have a place in your heart.

Give us your grace and love not to be over-impressed with beauty and strength but see the value and importance of little things, of the growing and

transforming ways of life. Teach us Lord, that less is more, that we can travel light and live full lives, that we will be strong enough in your presence though weak, burdened and coming near death.

Lord, we pray for all who fear the loss of their power – loss of physical strength, loss of their role in the family, the loss of a job or position. Guide us and give us strength in your unfailing love.

Lord, we pray for all who do not know where their life will take them and for those who do not like what they have to do. Guide us and give us strength in your unfailing love. Lord, we pray for all who have lost their way, for all who are depressed, for all struggling with mental illness. Guide us and give us strength in your unfailing love.

Lord, we pray for all who have been displaced from their home and live in refugee camps, for all who suffer because of war or terrorism, for all who dare not speak their faith or opinion. Guide us and give us strength in your unfailing love.

Lord, we pray for all who are coming to the end of their lives and for all who are grieving the loss of a loved one. Guide us and give us strength in your unfailing love that one day we all may rejoice together in your nearer presence.

For all this we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hymn CH4 511 – Thy hand, O God, hath guided

Benediction

Go now, and wherever people will hear you, proclaim the life-changing love of God. Go now, with eyes set on the future. And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Spirit be with you and all whom you love this day and always. Amen.