

1st November 2020 6pm Thanksgiving for Life

Service led by Ann Gibbons, Readings by Peter and Anne Fisher, Talk by Roger Turner, Prayers by Lynda Howells. Poem read by Lynda Howells
This transcript is only of the readings and talk

1st Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

The Coming of the Lord

13 Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. **14** We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. **15** According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. **16** For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. **17** After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever.

18 Therefore encourage each other with these words.

This is the Word of the Lord

2nd Reading: John 14:1-6

Jesus comforts His disciples

1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. **2** In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. **3** And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. **4** You know the way to the place where I am going."

5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

This is the word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Talk

[Roger Turner:]

Good evening.

It's a great privilege to be with you this evening, at this service of All Souls. For me, this is a new experience, so bear with me, please. Shall we just start with a little prayer?

Heavenly Father, I want to pray for whoever is tuned into this service tonight, for those who may not be with us, but are thinking of loved ones at this time who have gone before us. And I just pray this service will really speak to their hearts, and that the words that You've placed on my heart, the scriptures that we've read, will really speak and bring us comfort as we journey on through our lives. Just bring this to You now, in Jesus' Name.
Amen.

But I say, this is certainly a new experience for me. I've got used to some of this modern technology, but this is the first time that I've preached or spoken, using this wonderful modern technology. I'm mindful if any of you go out to make a cup of tea, or switch me off, then I shall be none the wiser. But I do ask you to persevere, and bear with me, and pray that the few words I'm going to bring tonight will bring some comfort, assurance and hope to you.

I've taken many funeral services during my 40+ years of ministry, and you will have been to many services likewise. And I wonder if you realise that every service, the minister or pastor, taking the service, be it in a church or a chapel, or wherever, will start with those familiar words of Jesus from John, chapter 11. And I read it slowly because these are very powerful words, as we move into our service this evening.

25 Jesus said, I am the resurrection, and I am the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.

A wonderful verse with which to start my talk tonight. So what is All Souls? Well, I'm just mindful that the Church has this wonderful calendar. We're moving shortly into Advent, leading up to Christmas, then Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and then Trinity and Pentecost, Harvest. And then All Souls, so it's got a kind of flow and a pattern to it. And the first Sunday in November is traditionally that time of All Souls, when the world out there will be celebrating with Halloween, whereas the Church and Christians want to take this opportunity, this moment, to reflect on those loved ones who have gone before us. And of course this just precedes the normal Remembrance Sunday, when we remember all those who gave their lives for freedom in previous wars.

I want to take a moment to reflect actually and give you a moment too to just bring before GOD¹ those people on your hearts tonight. Can I just share with you a few. It's 30 or more years ago that I was at the bedside of both my father and mother when they died out in Canada and I took both of their services. There's going to be people, my wife's brother who died five or six years ago now, at 56 years of age, leaving two young teenage twin daughters. I took David's service, which was perhaps one of the hardest I've ever taken. And then there's going to be people, family people, I think of my cousin's wife, Patricia, who died just 18 months ago or so. Gail Fish, great friends of ours in my curacy, down in Cleveland near Bristol 40 years ago, she died just recently. And we want to remember her tonight. And then as you move into the family of the church here at St. John's, in this last year, in these very difficult times, I think of people like Max Roberts, Harry Elliot, Mark Barnard, Ken Collins, who's son spoke at the Knights Meadow service this morning so well. Janet Davis, another family I got very close to. Dear Janet died just over a year ago. And people that some of you won't remember like Eileen Norcliffe, the great church cake baker, who died just recently, with no family. And what's been so hard and hurtful, really, and cruel about this pandemic, is that these people have had very small services, limited numbers, maybe close family - 15 to 30, no more. And we haven't been able to have those moments of celebration, and thanksgiving for their lives, which we traditionally would have. And I can think of some of those people where the church would be packed with people wanting to give thanks for their lives, and sharing some of their stories and memories of whoever's service it may have been. So, whoever you are tonight, wherever you are, here's just a moment to reflect, just a moment of quietness, for you to bring before GOD - I've only just mentioned a few - but for you to bring before GOD, just name them quietly, wherever you are tonight. Just bring them to GOD, those people whose lives you want to give thanks for, maybe a parent or whoever: just bring them before GOD now.

1 Roger Turner always capitalises GOD when he writes His name down.

[pause]

Well, as I said just now about these services people have had over these last six or eight months, we are living in, well, troubled times, testing times. This pandemic, somebody at our service this morning said they saw it more and more as a plague than a than a pandemic. And I don't know about you, but I'm picking up a totally new vocabulary. Here we are, again into 'lockdown', 'self-isolating', the 'R' rating. I mean, this is a new vocabulary. And I'm sure like many of you, I, my wife here, feel at times, a little COVID-weary. As I say to my grandchildren, at times Papa has the COVID blues, the lockdown blues. But I do thank, we do thank GOD for this technology. I'm slowly getting used to it. We had a Zoom service this morning with our church, a little home group I belong to, we Zoom together each week. And likewise, with the family. But again, like many of you at this time, it's hard that we haven't seen our grandchildren (10 of them, 2 great-grandchildren) since last New Year. And although we Zoom with them, it's not the same as actually being with them sitting down for a meal together, and being able to give them a good hug. And the same with my brothers and sisters in the church. It's lovely to see them Sunday by Sunday. But how I miss, we miss, that actual being together. So I suppose likewise, one of these things I miss greatly is just getting out to visit people and visiting people like Iris Elliott and Geoff Allcock and just going around to somebody's house for a cup of tea and sharing stories together. But it's hard times, it's cruel times, but we must persevere.

I've also reflected that history has been full of times like this, we look at the Old Testament, there's that time when GOD took the Israelites into the desert for 40 years, and how there was much mumbling and grumbling at that time. The plagues, the gnats, the frogs, the locusts and so on, people again complaining and grumbling to GOD. And as history moved on, the Black Death. In the church that I looked after on the outskirts of Bath at Limpley Stoke, they had a lovely church and lovely churchyard, quite a big churchyard. And part of it, way out there, was squared off. That was the burial ground for people who died in the Black Death. We've had recently two World Wars. Well, I don't remember the First World War. But I do remember as a young baby, the Second World War, I think actually the First World War was followed by a pandemic of Spanish Flu. And I'm just mindful of, well, how this pandemic is harder actually than the Second World War, because at least the communities could meet each other come together, help to rebuild their lives, whereas at the moment, we're locked down, we can't even do that. However, there is a human resilience, there is a stoicism about the British people, that we will come through this, and as Vera Lynn in so famously sang and encouraged us with those words, "yes, we will meet again."

Several people have challenged me, both Christians and non-Christians, neighbours here who know that we're Christians who go to church, and have challenged me with this question. "Why does GOD allow this? Why? Why does GOD allow it? This GOD of yours - couldn't He stop it?" Well, of course He could, of course He could stop it. But my own reflections as we moved into the first lockdown, and I shared this with a number of people, is on reflection, I really do sense and feel that GOD is trying to say something to His humanity at this moment in time. If you look at where we were, before the pandemic came to us, the first virus arrived, we saw a world that was, well, a real concern about pollution, a real concern about climate change, the climate and so on. And people charging around, life was frenetic, work, trying to be successful with things, never being satisfied with what we've got, but wanting and chasing for more, and so on. And I really do believe, I really do sense that GOD is wanting and trying to say something to His humanity. And it's simply this: "Slow down. Slow down. Be still. Be still and know that I am GOD." My fear is that as we come through this, and we surely will, with the arrival of maybe in the New Year of a vaccine, is that we will revert to our old ways, with all the stress, depression, anxiety, and so on that that brings. When I sense that GOD looks

down and sees us charging around like an army of ants chasing after the wind, as it says in Ecclesiastes². So that then begs the question, "What hope do we have?" because as I talk to friends or people about where GOD is in all of this, one has to surely look for some message of hope. And that's what I'd like to focus in on now.

The first reading that Peter read for us tonight from 1 Thessalonians 4 is just a lovely, comforting word from GOD through His servant Paul. Do you remember Paul one moment was persecuting the Church: he was killing Christians, followers of Jesus, stoning of Stephen and so on. And he met with the risen Christ on that road to Damascus. And his life from that moment was changed, turned totally upside down. He met with the risen Jesus. And he went on to write this letter to this young church he planted in Thessalonica. He had three missionary journeys around the Mediterranean, and planted all these churches. And this letter to the young church at Thessalonica really speaks into our situation, our thoughts this evening.

So here's Paul, really filled with the Holy Spirit. And he's writing to this church, but he's also writing to us, GOD is wanting to speak to us through this passage. And as I read it, and I've read it many times, as I read it, I like to put my own name in there to personalise it. So I really feel GOD is speaking to me. And he starts with these opening words, he says, "Roger, I do not want you to remain in ignorance. I do not want you to remain in ignorance." GOD is saying, "I want to give you some idea of what happens when we die, and what lies beyond this, eternal life, this everlasting life. And we're not called to grieve," he says, "We're not called to grieve, like those who have no help." And my sadness is seeing the difference between taking a Christian funeral and taking a non-Christian funeral. The difference between witnessing the encouragement, the uplifting of a Christian service, to the ones to the people who have no hope at all, and my prayer is always that through any service, there may be seekers, non-believers who do get, or start to have, a glimmer of hope. And Paul goes on in that passage to spell out the Good News, he speaks of the truth. He says,

13 I do not wish you to remain in ignorance, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others who have no hope. **14** For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so it will be for those who have died, GOD will bring them to life with Jesus.

That is the promise for you and for me, that we will be brought to life with Jesus. "I can tell you this," he says, "from the Lord's own teaching."³ You remember that Jesus talked of His impending death to His followers and disciples, His resurrection, His ascension, that He would send the comforter, the counsellor, the Holy Spirit, and that He would finally ascend to be with His Father. And that He'd come again! And the amazing thing is that all those prophecies of Jesus have been fulfilled, He died for you and for me, on the Cross at Calvary, GOD by His power on that first Easter day raised Him from the dead. And He sent His Holy Spirit as He promised to us. I couldn't become a Christian without the Holy Spirit working in me, enabling me to say, Jesus Christ is Lord. Jesus is my Saviour. That's the work of GOD's love and His Holy Spirit. I couldn't know forgiveness without the work of the Holy Spirit in me. And He also ascended to be reunited with the Trinity, with GOD the Father, GOD the Son, GOD the Holy Spirit. And all we await now is for that final promise to be fulfilled, that He will come again, to take us to be with Him. He says, "We can tell you this from the Lord's own teaching, that we who are left alive until He comes, shall not proceed those who have already died." So those that we mentioned by name tonight in our hearts, those that we thanked GOD for tonight, they're asleep. But when Jesus comes, they will be taken up, they will be taken to glory, taken to Heaven first, to Paradise first, and then we who are still

2 e.g. Ecclesiastes 1:14

3 See verse 15

alive, will be caught up in the cloud. And this will all happen at the sound of the archangel's voice and GOD's trumpet call. Those who have died in Christ will be the first to rise. Then those of us who are left behind will join them, caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we should always be with the Lord and with each other. And he finally says, comfort each other with these words. So that's my prayer tonight, that we are comforted. We're told how all of this is going to happen. What I'm very thankful for is that we're not told *when* it's going to happen. And I'm very thankful for that. Because elsewhere in the Scripture, it says, "Roger," it says, folks, "be alert, be ready. Because Jesus will come back like a thief in the night. We don't know when, but be ready, and be prepared."

So as I reflect on all this, my own journey, in the twilight years of my life, there are certain things I want to say thank-You for: I continually want to thank GOD for His grace, to me, to you, to His church, to His creation, you know, His graciousness, His grace, **GOD's Riches At Christ's Expense**, GOD's love for me, GOD's mercy, that my sins are forgiven, for the work that Jesus did on the Cross. Yes, I've acknowledged my sin. But I believe that Jesus died for me, and I have committed, surrendered my life to Jesus. He's my Lord, and my Saviour. That is all the work of GOD's grace. And that feeds into my faith, to continually acknowledge and thank GOD for His graciousness towards me, towards you, helps to build up my faith. And as my faith is built up, so my hope is encouraged too: my hope stands firm. And in the words of that lovely, favourite hymn of mine, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, praising my Saviour all the day long. This is my story. Blessed assurance." Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Father GOD.

So finally, I just want to move to Jesus with His friends and His disciples. I'm mindful during lockdown, what we're experiencing in the here-and-now with this plague and pandemic. It's interesting, isn't it? That the very last meal that Jesus had with His followers, His disciples, was in an upper room, behind closed doors, locked for fear of the authorities. If you like, they were locked down, as Jesus had that wonderful time. How I would have loved to just be in there and been a fly on the wall, to experience and watch Jesus ministering to His closest friends and followers. And what was He seeking to do? He was seeking to do what I'm trying in some small way to do tonight, which has to build up and boost our hopes, our faith, our faith in GOD, our faith in Jesus, our faith in His promises. Jesus starts in that reading that Anne bought us from John chapter 14, with those lovely words again, which I personalise. It says, "Roger, set your troubled heart at rest, believe in GOD, believe also in Me," and I put in brackets, "(and my promises for you)".

He goes on to say "in My Father's house there are many rooms," there's plenty of space in Heaven for all of us, all of GOD's creation. And the wonderful thing is that rather like going on holiday, Jesus has gone before us. He's gone to prepare a place for you and for me. Isn't that wonderful! He's gone ahead of us. But He then says, "I am going to come back for you. I'm going to come back for you, so that in Heaven, we will be together. Where I am, there you will also be." And I find that (well, some of you know me well), I find that a really WOW moment, a WOW statement, a WOW promise: I'll fall asleep, Jesus will come, and He will take me to His Father's house, He will take me to Paradise, to glory and where I'm going, He's already been ahead and prepared a place for me, coming back and taking me, taking you, to be with Him forever! For eternity! So for me, that is a major promise, a major... Well, I mean!

But actually we go on to read that Thomas probably reflects a lot of us, as he says, "But Lord, we do not know where you're going, so how can we know the way?" and then Jesus says, "... Well, Jesus made a lot of 'I am's, so 'I am the bread of life'. 'I am the gate'. 'I am the good shepherd'. Here He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the Father except by me." So as I pray, we pray, our Christian family prayer, "Our Father, who is / who art in Heaven,

holy/hallowed be thy name." I can only come to know my heavenly Father through knowing Jesus. Jesus is the way. Jesus said, "Roger, if you've seen me, you've seen the Father." This GOD who's too big for me to take on board, and I can see and know and love in Jesus, and that is all the work of the other member of the Trinity, of course, all the work of the Holy Spirit. And my prayer tonight, and my prayer for myself as I journey on, is that that I will continue to hold to the way, having found the way, hold to it, hold to the way, hold to Jesus, and that we seek the truth. We know perhaps part, we have the scriptures, there's always more truth to grab hold of and grasp. But always be seeking the truth and also of course, living the life. And this is a time, isn't it, during this pandemic where we may not be able to have missions and have wonderful services and seeing people come to faith in Christ, but as Andy Collins was touching on this morning, we are able to connect, and witness, and care for, and love people at this time of this lockdown, this pandemic, when there's going to be a lot of people feeling very lonely, very fearful, and in need of just a listening ear, just a smile, just... Each day I try to ring around four or five people just to say, "Hi, how are you?" and so on. So, live the life, live the life, may we shine something of Jesus into people's lives.

So when Jesus comes to take us home, what then? Through those two scriptures we've looked at tonight, GOD is not wanting us to be in ignorance, He's given us a lot of information, a lot of what lies ahead before us, what's happened to those who've gone before us. If you want to really have a final cameo and look, there's one reading, which we haven't had tonight, and I do commend to you to look at. Many of you have read it many times, but go to it, go to it afresh. I want to just take you to Revelation 21. It's right at the end of the Bible. It's a verse where Jesus is speaking to John the Divine, old John dying on the isle of Patmos. And it's almost as if GOD's wanting to say "Look, I've shared with you so much. I really want to leave with you this picture of where you're going to spend eternity with me." It's Revelation 21, just seven verses, and it says this.

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. **2** I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

Wow! Isn't that wonderful? What a wonderful picture!

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is now with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. **4** "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

5 He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'

6 He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. **7** He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son (and daughter).

There's just a final verse to leave you with, which always helps me. I've tried to help you tonight with just a glimpse at one or two scriptures, one or two words from GOD to illuminate for us a future of hope. In 1 Corinthians 13⁴, Paul writes these words, "In good time, all will be revealed." "In good time, all will be revealed."

4 See verse 12

But let's give thanks to GOD tonight, for what He has already revealed to us through His Word. And let us thank GOD for those people who are dear and near to us who have died, maybe recently, or many, many years ago, but having an opportunity tonight to just thank GOD for them, for all that they meant to us, for journeying with them, and the memories that we cherish and hold of them. "Where, O death, is thy sting? Where, O grave thy victory? I triumph still, if Thou abide with me." ⁵

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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Please note: inclusive language was not introduced into the NIV until the 2011 edition.

5 Lines from Abide With Me, inspired by 1 Corinthians 15:55