

DSW Written Service – 16th June 2024 – Revd John Yarrien
“A Present God”

Call to worship

Be Still for the presence of the Lord, The holy one, here;
Come bow before him now, With reverence and fear.
In him no sin is found, For we stand on holy ground.
Be Still for the presence of the Lord, The Holy One, is Here.

We begin our worship, asking God to be present to us, To still our hearts, to open our eyes and to give us ears to hear. Let us now be still and wait upon the Lord.

Amen

Prayer of Thanks:

Living God, We thank you for your promise That when we come together in the name of Christ, He is here among us. We thank you that he is here now, Ready to speak, listen, forgive, teach and love.

He is present here in one another, In the fellowship we share together. He is present through the scriptures, Constantly speaking to us in new ways. He is present in the sharing of bread and wine, Those timeless reminders of his life, his death and his resurrection. He is present in the world around us, In the beauty of creation and the people we meet. He is present every moment of every day, Through his life-giving and life-transforming spirit. In the name of Christ, we praise you. Amen.

Prayer of Confession:

Father God, We have done or said things this week, that we wish to lift you.
Because we need to say sorry, for the impact they made, for the hurt they caused.

<Pause>

God so loved the world, That he gave his only Son, That all who have belief in him, may have life eternal. God offers us forgiveness, for all that is past, So that we might live in the fullness of his love and glory. **Amen.**

Hymn: - STF 55 – Immortal Invisible, God Only Wise

1 Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

2 Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might —
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

3 To all life thou givest, to both great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,

and wither and perish; but naught changeth thee.

4 Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
all praise we would render: O help us to see
'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.

5 Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Walter Chalmers Smith (1824–1908)

Reading: Acts 17: 22 – 31

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor[□] he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God[□] and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring." ²⁹ Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

Sermon: - "Going deeper – A Present God"

I wholeheartedly believe that God is present, in every moment, of every day, because as the Psalmist so powerfully puts it "*O lord my God, you have searched me and you have known me, is there nowhere I can escape your spirit*". On our Honeymoon, Cora and I were staying on the island of Samos in Greece, and we booked a day trip to go to another island, Patmos. When you stand in the monastery, looking out of the window, over the whole island and the Aegean Sea, you get a great sense of God's presence as well as a human indication of God's perspective on that place.

After a wonderful day exploring the island, we set off sail again on the boat (a small ship really), heading out on calm waters, until shortly after leaving the boundary of the port, and we literally seemed to hit a storm. The boat seemed ever so small, ever so flimsy in these rough water Tossed up and diving down in the waves. The Rain lashing against the boat. People screaming up top and below deck. In those hours, in those rough seas, I think I have never felt God's presence more, calming us, protecting us, showing the ships staff the right way to navigate around the storm. And then the wonderful sight on the Horizon, the harbour wall at Samos.

Our readings this week challenge us, because God is present with us, everywhere, all the time – indeed the Psalmist says – HOW CAN I GET AWAY FROM YOU GOD! And our reading from Acts challenges us, because we are called to share that ever present God, in all the world. Finding ways to share our experience of God's presence in our lives, so that others can connect to that same Love, Peace and Hope, as we do. So lets dive into our readings and see where the spirit takes us. **In him we live, and move and have our being.**

Before I get into the reading from the Book of Acts, I want to reflect for a couple of moments on our experience of God in our lives. My experience of God - is not going to be the same as yours. My experience of God, is that he gives the strength and wisdom to do things WAY WAY beyond my own capacity, every single day, all done in his strength. He took a shy, short, southern lad, whisked him down to Plymouth for 3 years, with Business degree in tow, back to Winchester to work for Hampshire County council, turned him into a youth worker, and director of youth work, called and trained him as a local preacher, got him through the Candidating process, sent him to Durham England and Durham North Carolina, to be trained, and brought him to you, married to Cora, as Me, Rev John Yarrien, your Superintendent minister.

God has to be present in that – because it just doesn't make sense otherwise. But not everyone's experience of God is like mine or like yours. God can sometimes feel distant, in the midst of the storms of life.

Whereas our reading from Acts suggests that God is above all, through all and in all, he suggests with conviction that God is intimately present in all things, exemplified by Christ's life, death and resurrection. This shows that God's presence in our lives can come out of the blue, or in a single moment, as Paul discovered in a Road to Damascus moment. For others their experience of God is of a gradual journey of seeking and finding God in long-term faithfulness, through the highs and lows of life. Don't forget that the founder of Methodism, John Wesley... his heart strangely warmed occurred after a lifetime's journey. **In him we live, and move and have our being.**

So let's turn now, more specifically to this reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Paul in this speech, is speaking to the great philosophers of Athens, the elite of society, the great thinkers and poets and religious people of his time. Paul, a Jew from Jerusalem, came to Athens to announce the "the Good News of Jesus and Resurrection". With a distinct hint of irony (maybe seen from my British eyes) Paul, doesn't mince his words – declaring "*People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious*". This I am sure would have been very shocking to those first hearers of the word.

He rejects the whole idea of Temples, Sacrifice and statues of Gods. Instead he preaches the word of Good News, of a creator God, who made the world and everything in it. The amazing thing about this whole scene, is that although what Paul is saying is very shocking, he does it using the symbols, rituals, practices and words of those present in Athens. So they can totally relate absolutely everything he is saying, to their everyday, lived out experiences. Paul does the unbelievable – tells them on the one hand that everything they do and have said up until now is not the END truth, but does it in such a way that they can relate and respond to it. Because he made the truth RELEVANT to their culture. For Paul, God is very close to us, the giver of everything to us, the passionate seeker who wants us to seek him in return.

The Simple truth is that we cannot let people know about our ever-present God, in this day, in this culture, in this context, if we don't use the language and modes of delivery that 21st Century Britain, lives and breathes. We have to make it culturally relevant. Then the power of that Good News will either hit people like a tidal wave – and we have to be prepared to pick up the pieces or they will do as some of the Athenians do in our passage – walk away, and say no THANK YOU very much. First we have to find away to walk alongside. Talk to people, absorb their culture if we don't understand it, and then build relationship. We might be just the person, in the right moment of someone's life, and boom – God is able to break into their world, and transform the life. I think that's a pretty AMAZING and EXCITING prospect, thought, and something that everyone here should be excited about as well. We could all be that person – that unlocks the truth of God's love for, any given person that God puts in our way, throughout our lives. It's an awesome responsibility, but an AMAZING privilege. **In him we live, and move and have our being.**

This leaves for us some more challenging questions: What does it mean for each one of us, to Sense God's Presence? Why is it important for us feel God's presence, in our Christian Journey? And – does our discipleship, worship and mission ground us in the truth of our God who is Love, and is Present with us?

There is a living God, and he is now calling everyone, everywhere. He needs us to make him known to our world and our community. He needs us to recognise our experiences of God in the everyday, and for us to have the confidence to share those experiences, around the table, and with those we meet in his name. O Lord, you have searched me and you know me, In him we live, move and have our being. **Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession: -

Lord, Hear our Prayer . . . **Lord, graciously hear us.**

For the World . . . *Pray for those parts of the world torn apart by war. Pray for our politicians in this Election period. Pray for those suffering oppression and injustice.*

For the Church . . . *Pray for your local church and pray for the circuit, as we continue our conversations in Stationing this year. Pray for Rev Jane and her husband Graham during her sabbatical.*

For the Community . . . *Pray for God's holy spirit to descend on our communities, that they might come to know Jesus as Lord, and friend in God's abundant love.*

For those close to our hearts and minds . . . *Pray for the people, places and situations that are in need of God's healing presence and wholeness.*

God of compassion and Mercy, Listen to our prayers, And respond according to our Lord Jesus Christ, Who Said: Ask and you will receive; Seek and you will find; Knock and the door will be opened to you. So to you merciful God, Be Glory and praise forever, Amen.

The Lord's Prayer: -

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 trespasses, As we forgive those who trespass against us, And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil, For thine is the kingdom, The power and the Glory, For ever and ever. Amen.

Blessing

God of All, When we think we have all the answers, Remind us of the questions we have overlooked, When we cant find the answers, Help us to know that journeying is as important as the journey's end. And when we want to remain comfortable in our ignorance, Challenge our complacency with the mystery of your Love for this complex world.

The Blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Be with you all, With those you love, And those you are called to love, Now, in the name of Christ. Amen.