**SUNDAY SERVICE MAY 17TH 2020**







ST MICHAEL’S CHURCH HOOLE

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**The Gospel Advances**

***‘God commands all people everywhere to repent’ Acts 17 v 30***

**Today we are thinking about the way the Christian Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ’s saving Death and Resurrection spread rapidly throughout Europe and Asia to people of every nationality. Then as now God is asking everyone to repent and turn to Him. What is our part?**

Our first hymn is a hymn about God’s greatness: ***How Great thou Art*** [***https://youtu.be/PdE\_NKyY\_o0***](about:blank)

O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder  
consider all the works thy hand hath made,  
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,  
thy power throughout the universe displayed;

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,  
how great thou art, how great thou art!  
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee,  
how great thou art, how great thou art!*

When through the woods and forest glades I wander  
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;  
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur  
and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze:  
*Then sings my soul…*

And when I think that God, his Son not sparing,  
sent him to die – I scarce can take it in  
that on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,  
he bled and died to take away my sin:  
*Then sings my soul…*

When Christ shall come with shouts of acclamation  
and take me home – what joy shall fill my heart!  
Then shall I bow in humble adoration  
and there proclaim, ‘my God, how great thou art!’  
*Then sings my soul…*

**Let us pray:**

**PRAYER OF THE WEEK:**

**Risen Christ, we thank you for the gift of your Word, and all the invitations, commands and promises that are contained there:**

**help your Church to obey your command and draw the nations to the fire of your love,**

**to the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

**“THE GOSPEL ADVANCES”**

**“God commands all people everywhere to repent”.** *Acts 17: v 30.*

**READING Acts 17: v 22-34.**

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: ‘People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

‘The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. “For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.”

‘Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.’

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’ At that, Paul left the Council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

**SERMON**

**“THE GOSPEL ADVANCES”**

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we pray that you will give us minds to grasp the glory of your Word, and hearts to fathom the depths of your love. For the glory of your Name. Amen.

How good are you at walking round a new and strange city for the first time? Do you read up all about it beforehand? Do you make first for places of culture, or outstanding examples of architecture? I think it is a skill to discover the heart of a city, which I am not very good at, although I enjoy trying.

The Apostle Paul is on his third missionary journey. He has just arrived in Athens, having been speaking to Jews in North Greece, and he has left his companions Silas and Timothy in Berea. So he is on his own in Athens – the great centre of intellect, sophisticated argument, culture, architecture and history, in the ancient world. Paul does what any tourist would do – he wanders round the city. Most of us explore a place like Athens lost in admiration – we stand for example at the foot of the Parthenon, and try to imagine what it looked like all those years ago.

But Paul’s overriding reaction as he wandered round was not one of admiration or wonder or respect. Inwardly he was seething, indignant – our version says “greatly distressed”. Everywhere he went, all he could see was idols – temples, shrines, statues, sanctuaries – and all to every kind of false god imaginable. It was said of Athens in the ancient world that if you walked round it, you were more likely to bump into a god than a man. Paul who was , brought up on the ten commandments would have been offended in every fibre of his being , to see them flouted as blatantly as this, -especially the first two, “I am the Lord your God – You shall have no other gods before me”, and  “Do not make for yourself any graven images”

When Paul first visited a town he always spoke to the Jews first where he would reason with them from the Scriptures – he takes a passage from the Old Testament, and explains how Jesus is the fulfilment of that passage. He did this first in Athens but then he went into the market place and began talking to a group of philosophers. They are struck with what he says and they take him to a meeting of the Areopagus which was the Athenian equivalent of the House of Lords or Senate. Here the members amazingly invite him to explain his new teaching. But in Athens, no one is familiar with the Old Testament and people are accustomed to sophisticated argument and the cut and thrust of intellectual debate. So what will Paul say? How will he go about speaking to them?

Well, he begins where they are. He refers to the many shrines and idols and objects of worship that he had observed, and says “I see that you are very religious. You have so many different gods here in Athens that I even found one called “To the unknown God!  But actually I am going to tell you the Name of the One True God. What you worship as unknown I am going to enlighten you. “ And this is where Paul’s approach is so fascinating. He begins with creation – the God who made the world and everything in it. He goes on to say that not only did God create us, He continues to sustain us.

 It is God who determined and oversees history – the times set for people.

And our geography – the exact places where we should live.

And Paul, in talking to the Athenians about the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, knocks many false religious ideas on the head:-

You think that we can contain God in a building, says Paul. Not at all – the Creator God doesn’t live in humanly constructed buildings.

You think we are serving God – not at all. He doesn’t need us, we need Him to sustain us.

You think that God is remote, distant, far away from us. Not at all – God is not far from each one of us. And Paul shows his wide reading by quoting a sixth century BC poet called Epimenides of Knossos in Crete. ”We are His offspring”.

You think we can fashion a likeness of God – Not at all. Fortunately for us, Paul goes on, God has overlooked up to now all these wrong religious superstitions – until now. But now God has sent someone who will one day judge the whole world. And God has one main instruction for us – v 30. “In the past God overlooked such ignorance. But now He commands all people everywhere to repent.”

(Illustration) Michael Alison was a conservative MP who served under Ted Heath and Margaret Thatcher. He fought right at the end of the second world war, and when he came out of the Army, he thought he would go to a nearby church. The preacher happened to be speaking on this particular text “God commands all people everywhere to repent.” Michael Alison sat there and thought to himself :- for month after month now, my life has been based on orders. I have obeyed commands from captains, majors, colonels and even generals. I’ve given some orders to ranks below me. Everything was based on and depended on these orders being acted upon. Then he paused and thought to himself :- how natural then that God should have an order for me. And it should be the most natural thing in the world for me to respond to my Creator. And on that day, Michael Alison responded to the divine command, repented, and committed his life to God.

So let’s draw the threads together. Paul, in addressing the Athenians, shows the universal claim of the Lord of Heaven and earth over the whole world. There is One True God. But there is also a particular individual response to that One True God. And there is a similarity with our present predicament. We are involved in a pandemic that affects the whole world. And yet at the same time, we are individually affected, and there is an individual response  for each one of us. We take comfort from the fact that God is in control, even when we feel things are out of control. God is not only in control, but moving things forward to that Day referred to here. A Day that God Himself has set when He will judge the whole world with justice, by the Man Jesus that He has appointed. Let’s not lose sight of the wonderful control God has over the present, the perfect justice that He will execute, and the glorious future that He offers to all who respond to this command. This divine command addressed to each one of us to bring us back to worshipping this God as we should and as He deserves. A response summed up in the last line of our final hymn this morning, a response based on that of Isaiah:-

“Here I am, Lord” = individual response

“I will go, Lord, if you lead me “, ie out into the world/community

Let us pray: Lord, we thank you for the glories of your Gospel, and for your command to take it out into all the world. Help us to respond to your purposes for us as revealed in Scripture, for our own building up, and for the good of your people. Amen

**HYMN** Our next hymn is based on Mary’s great hymn of praise to God for His greatness and His saving power for all nations***. Tell out my soul***. [https://youtu.be/s6ji4y9Q-K0](about:blank)

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!  
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;  
tender to me the promise of his word –  
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!  
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;  
his mercy sure, from age to age the same –  
his holy name: the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!  
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;  
proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,  
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!  
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure:  
tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord  
to children’s children and for evermore!

**The Apostles' Creed**

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.  
  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

**PRAYERS**

Lord at this time when we are still in an unprecedented situation in our country, we need to turn to you every day. This week we are suddenly faced with more new challenges as the country starts to open up a little again following lockdown, and our emotions are once again sent into turmoil. Some are anxious to return to work, while others are anxious about exposing themselves to risk in the workplace. Some are happy to be allowed more freedom in whom they see and where they go, but others are worried that this may precipitate a new wave of infections that will threaten us all. Parents are keen for their children to resume education, but fearful that it may not be possible to keep them safe in their schools and playgrounds. Help us Lord, we pray, to cope with the uncertainty and fear of these developments, and to remember that if we place our trust in you, you will guide and protect us through this new stage of the virus.

We remember in our prayers all who are frightened by these changes, who feel anxious and uncertain again about their safety now that we are asked to venture out from the security of staying at home. Hear our prayers Lord for the isolated, the lonely, and the insecure at this most difficult time in our lives, and help us to place our trust in you as we adjust once again.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Lord we give thanks for the strength of our community here in Hoole, as we remember the fun and sociability we shared at the recent VE Day celebrations, even though this was far from what we had planned. We give thanks that we, as a church community, are here for one another, encouraging and supporting each other if we falter, and reminding each other of the faith in you that binds us together. We give thanks for our friends, our family, and all those who care for us and love us, even though we cannot see each other and share an embrace.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Lord we pray this morning especially for everyone suffering from Covid 19. For those mourning loved ones who have died, for those struggling in intensive care units all over the country, and for those managing symptoms as best they can at home. Place your healing hands on them Lord and bring them through. We pray for medical and nursing staff and carers who are working so hard, often at great personal cost to themselves and their families, to try to bring light, hope and healing to all who suffer in mind or body.

And we also pray for all who are sick with other illnesses and in other ways, who have no choice but to wait until this passes for treatment. Give them courage to manage their fear and anxiety, relief from their pain, and fortitude as they wait for normality to return. Within our own community, we pray especially for Pearl Read in St Catherine’s hospice. We also pray for Nancy Mawdsley, and for Althea Slater and all others known to us who need our prayers.

Lord in your mercy.

Hear our prayer.

Finally Lord we give thanks for the lives of those known to us who have died recently We give thanks for the life of Marie Hawron Manda’s Grandmother and pray for Manda and the family. And we pray especially for the family and friends of Mike Redshaw, whose funeral will take place at St Michael’s on Wednesday this week. May his family feel your loving arms around them Lord as they mourn with the added constraint of separation, and give them courage and peace.

Help us to remember Lord that you are with us at the beginning and end of each day, that through you we have hope, and that your Word to us contains so many words of comfort.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We join now in the prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray:

**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**

**NOTICES**

**Thursday May 21st is Ascension Day and we will be posting a short Ascension Day service on our website.**

**Ascension day begins the 10days of Thy Kingdom come which is a global prayer movement that invites Christians around the world to pray between Ascension Day (21 May) and Pentecost (31 May) for more people to come to know Jesus.**

**On all of the 10days of Thy Kingdom Come you will find prayer resources on our website to help you join in this great wave of prayer across our world that many people will come to know the Lord Jesus for themselves.**

**HYMN;** Our final hymn focuses on the Call of Jesus Christ to each one of us to respond to His call:- ***I the Lord of sea and sky*** [***https://youtu.be/mgLwH5RdtPk***](about:blank)

I, the Lord of sea and sky,  
I have heard My people cry.  
All who dwell in dark and sin,  
My hand will save.  
I who made the stars of night,  
I will make their darkness bright.  
Who will bear My light to them?  
Whom shall I send?

*Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord?  
I have heard You calling in the night.  
I will go Lord, if You lead me.  
I will hold Your people in my heart.*

I, the Lord of snow and rain,  
I have borne my people's pain.  
I have wept for love of them,  
They turn away.  
I will break their hearts of stone,  
Give them hearts for love alone.  
I will speak My word to them  
Whom shall I send?

*Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord?*

I, the Lord of wind and flame  
I will tend the poor and lame.  
I will set a feast for them,  
My hand will save  
Finest bread I will provide,  
Till their hearts be satisfied.  
I will give My life to them,  
Whom shall I send?

*Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord?*

**BLESSING**

May the Love of the Risen Lord Jesus draw you to Himself

May the Power of the Lord Jesus strengthen you to serve Him

And may the Joy of the Lord Jesus fill your hearts

And so may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you and all those whom you love, now and for ever more. Amen

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