

Sermon for Sunday Jan 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Jer 1:4-10 Ps 71:1-6 1 Cor 13:1-13 Luke 4:21-30

Today's psalm 71 speaks directly to us where we are. It was written as a lament that addresses the pastoral station where something is amiss in faith and life. What was normal is no longer the norm. We are anxious and disheartened, even depressed about where we are with covid, things we had hoped to be return to we haven't and it's feeling very much like we never will. We have done everything, for the most part, that we have been asked to do yet the outcome that we thought would happen hasn't. We are still prohibited from doing things that we used to do and miss doing. We get it, it is for our own health and safety, yet it feels like it is all in vain.

Psalm 71 needs to move us from agreeing with the lament of the writer to seeking a new understanding of the relationship that we have and could have with God. It becomes a safe place and therefore a place that a new relationship and understanding of our faith and our God can take place. As one theologian put it "God is regarded as a refuge, a deliverer, a rescuer, a rock, a fortress – one to be leaned on and praise." This is especially true when the writer talks about God being the hope that he has, not just present with hope but the bearer of hope.

And how does God expect us to practice our faith, with love. Paul tries to make it simple for the church in Corinth. He outlines exactly what he feels God expects of our worship through love. In effect it is not what we do that is important but that we do it in love. In today's society love is a word that is used very often. It has become a turn of phrase rather than a heartfelt emotion. For Paul, one theologian states, love is agape. This is God's love and it is not an emotion but an action. We do that often without thinking these days, acting in love. We move as far away from others as we can as we pass them on the sidewalk so that we and they are protected. We wear a mask, we get our vaccinations and only get together with those in our bubble. While these are all things that we do because the health organisations of our city have said we need to, we do them because we love others and want to make sure that we protect them as much as we protect ourselves. The other thing that Paul does for us is to stipulate that love is never ending. He agrees that human aspects of love will change and decrease but God's love never will. What a statement of hope to leave us with today. At a time when a lot of us are finding hope something that seems to have gone by the wayside, the fact that love is there and always will be from God is certainly something to grasp onto and hold onto.

Perhaps we need to reexperience the feeling that the people gathered around Jesus when he said that scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing. They must have been filled with wonder and several other emotions. When they asked themselves who this could be, wasn't it Joseph's boy? Wasn't this someone that they had watched grow up? Wasn't he that non-descript boy from their home town? And he is saying this, how wonderful! Someone we know is now going to be someone important and will lead us where we need to go.

But then the message was given and the demands of it became clear and the hope and wonder probably disappeared a little. After all this meant that they had to follow God's definition of love. That meant they had to change how they did things, who they included in things and probably how they practiced what they believed. Not only was God there for the Jewish culture

but for the Gentiles as well. For the High Priests and the leaders of society, those looked upon as needy and beneath them were now to be seen as equals. The very thought of that must have made them stop and rethink the whole thing until they realised after following Jesus and understanding his message they came to appreciate what this meant. They like us needed examine just how inclusive they were and how they could do it better.

One theologian said What capacity do we have for hearing the new things of God in our midst? A very good and thought provoking question for us to look at today. Have we truly accepted the inclusivity of agape from God in not just our worship but also how we worship and how we live.

We all have criteria that we have adopted over time to ascertain who we let in as friends, as family. There are a lot of things that go into forming this criteria and for the most part it works for us because we continue to use it. The only criteria that God has for loving is that we ask, and wouldn't it be great if this new relationship that God is calling us to worked it's way into our everyday life as well?

How has God manifested the new words that God has given to us? Have we heard them? What have we done with them? These are all really good questions to ask both ourselves and our church. Over the past few years our Social Justice and Advocacy department of the Diocese has offered to the parishes a variety of motions for them to pass at vestry and to do something about in the year that follows the meeting. Unfortunately, with covid, putting into action the ideas and plans we have had, for the most part, have had to be put on hold. We are still planning to work on not having single use plastic items in the church, both for us and for those who rent from us. This means no individual food items wrapped in plastic, it means doing more dishes as we get things in large quantities and divide them into glass holders to use. There are a lot of things that we can truly make a difference by just making a few changes. We also adopted one the following year around the racism issue that we made some movement on before we were shut down. We still have a long way to go on both of them. Both the idea that we adopted them and started action on them shows that God's word was not only heard by us but that it caused action to happen. Faith is after all action not just words so we are definitely practicing our faith as God would wish us to.

Perhaps as we wait again for the safety of our neighbours to be ensured before continuing to a new normal we don't have to wait to make sure that we learn how to practice our faith. We can pray for ways to decide how best to save our world and increase our faith. What changes can we make that will ensure that we can honour both our earth and the people on it. Both preserving our world for the present and the future is important and following through with God's command to love one another as God has loved us without question or exception are both ways that we can truly practice a faith that is whole and fulfilling for all.

Amen.