

Communion Service at Stoneygate Baptist Church - Sunday 1 November 2020
Prepared and Led by Mike Greenwood

Good morning and welcome to Stoneygate Baptist Church. Welcome to those of you who have come to the building today, and welcome to those of you who are watching or reading this at home. Although you can't be here, know that where we gather is irrelevant. It is the love we share in Christ that binds us as a community and no distance can overcome it. Although the situation may be that we cannot celebrate our communion together, I urge you that when we come to that part of our worship this morning, we think especially of our church family in different places and spaces.

Those who have been paying particular attention to my services during this season of remote worship will hopefully have noticed a pair of ongoing themes, joy in creation and hope that God's kingdom will come as we live and breathe through our words and deeds. I want to explore something slightly different this morning, All Saints Day. This is a day for us to remember that God is for everyone and so I want to open our worship together by sharing these familiar words from **1 Corinthians Chapter 13 Verses 4-8**.

'4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.
5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.'

One thing that people who worship here will know is that like many of you here in church and home I love to worship God in song. One of the most difficult aspects of the current situation for me is that I can't sing with you all as a congregation. Normally at this point I'd be inviting you to praise God in song however, here in church we are not able to do that. We will instead listen to the following performance but for those watching at home, I invite you to sing extra loud and with extra heartiness on our behalf.

We join together for *In Christ Alone My Hope Is Found*. All I will add is that there is one line that reads the 'wrath of God was satisfied'. While we can't do that to the recording, I tend to change the word wrath to the word love.

In Christ Alone My Hope Is Found.

In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain:
Then bursting forth in glorious day
Up from the grave He rose again
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
For I am His and He is mine
Bought with the precious blood of Christ

In Christ alone! - who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe.
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The *love* of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live.

No guilt in life, no fear in death,
This is the power of Christ in me
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand
Till He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

Before we move further, I am aware that we are in a darker season. It is cold, wet and the usual comforts of company and companionship are denied to us. I want to acknowledge the difficulty of this particular season in prayer. At the end of each section I will say 'Lord in your Mercy', please respond 'hear our prayer'.

Holy God, we open ourselves before you now and invite you into our deepest hearts. You know each of our circumstances and we know that in this time of darkness, where we feel lonely, trapped and afraid you are with us. We trust that you are weeping where we are weeping, that you feel joy when we feel joy and that through you, all of us that are frustrated, angry, despairing at the times we are going through will find peace. We pray for all of those in our congregation who may be fighting an internal battle with dark thoughts or anxiety.

Lord in your mercy - hear our prayer.

We raise up our communities both in faith and in the city. We know that so many are struggling to make ends meet with furlough, redundancy and unemployment. Grant our leaders both local and national the wisdom and the selflessness to put aside their own agendas and to put in place the right strategies to support and

*protect the most vulnerable in Leicester, Leicestershire and the rest of the U.K.
Lord in your mercy - hear our prayer.*

God, we hold up our world. As the death toll from covid, from climate change and from global exploitation of resources continues to escalate we would pray for your spirit of healing on every land. Send out your gifts of mercy and strength. Bless those living without hope, bless those who are without a voice and bless those who have been forgotten.

Lord in your mercy - hear our prayer.

And so let us join together once more in the Lord's Prayer.

[Lord's Prayer Video]

Last night was Halloween, usually celebrated by decorating with all things spooky. It's like any festival in that it has disputed origin, but many of the modern traditions are borrowed from the pagan festivals of Samhain. Many people inside and outside of the church tradition forget that Halloween as a word is a corruption of All hallow's eve, or the night before All Saint's Day. This is an odd one. In the Anglican church it is normally a day to remember all of those who have passed away in faith, in the Catholic church it celebrates all those saints, known and unknown who have finally achieved the 'Beatific Vision' and seen God face to face rather than through the lens of faith. In the baptist church, it isn't generally celebrated, and so I want to explore the opportunities that a day called 'All Saint's Day' presents to us. It would be interesting to hear from you at some point the answer to the question 'What does the word 'saint' mean to you?'. For now, we will hear our reading before I unpack these ideas a little more. Today's reading comes from Ezekiel 18 25:32

Ezekiel 18 25:32

25 "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear, you Israelites: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? 26 If a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin, they will die for it; because of the sin they have committed they will die. 27 But if a wicked person turns away from the wickedness they have committed and does what is just and right, they will save their life. 28 Because they consider all the offenses they have committed and turn away from them, that person will surely live; they will not die. 29 Yet the Israelites say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Are my ways unjust, people of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust?

30 “Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. 31 Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? 32 For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!

So let us respond to this reading by singing of repentance and God’s grace.

Amazing Grace

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me I once was lost, but now am found Was blind but now I see	Through many dangers, toils and snares We have already come T’was Grace that brought us safe thus far And Grace will lead us home
Was Grace that taught my heart to fear And Grace, my fears relieved How precious did that Grace appear The hour I first believed	Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me I once was lost but now am found Was blind but now I see

God is love. I want you all to keep that in mind as I speak or as you read or watch this. God is love. On this all saint’s day, I want to explore what the word Saint actually means. In modern times, a saint is someone who has been canonised by the Catholic church and elevated to sainthood. This is reserved for people who have been set apart as especially holy. One description used is ‘Heroic Sanctity’. I am not going to get into what I feel about the ability of people to be ‘holy’ and ‘sanctified’ but I will say that we are all human. Even the saints, even the disciples. As humans we are flawed and we are equally likely to mess things up and to hurt ourselves and each other.

The baptist tradition is deontological in as much as we tend not to believe that becoming a christian, or even a minister, changes you fundamentally. A minister is no different a type of christian than anyone else. They may be ordained either formally or informally to minister to a congregation. God has plans for each of us. For some of us that may be a call to family, or to social justice or to be an example of a good and true christian life in a largely secular workplace. Some are called to minister to a congregation. All of these are equally valuable to God, all of these people are equally valued by God. Perhaps for

us the idea of a saint being a special and set apart, particularly holy christian is less useful.

In the bible, the word 'saint' is used to mean a 'holy one'. It means one who is set apart for God's special purposes but I've already said that God has a purpose for each one of us. Everyone is loved and valued by God and God has good intentions for everyone. In this way we are all saints. Every human ever is a saint in God's eyes. I want to give you a moment to consider this as I think it's a pretty radical idea. Every single person is a saint in God's eyes.

So if everyone is a saint, what should we do with that information, particularly on all saints day? Well, a good starting point is our calling as christians. As reflections of God's image, we are called to live a life that reflects that of Jesus. To me, that means conspicuously and bravely calling for social justice and sadly, that still means calling for social change. It means quietly getting on with the work of caring for the poor and vulnerable in society. It means loving our siblings in the home, in the city and the world. When we step up to this calling we are doing the work that brings about God's vision for how the world should be. Another name for this is Heaven. We build the kingdom when we love our neighbours.

Another calling is the great commission. Jesus said 'Go and make disciples of all the nations' and this is often taken at face value, that making disciples is the end in itself. I want to suggest that we can take a deeper and more nuanced approach. Some scholars suggest that the phrase should instead read 'Go, and also make disciples of all the nations.' Subtle difference, but important. The first one makes turning people into christians the most important thing, whereas the latter implies more about the journey. In the second version we are called to go out, to live in the world. To journey where we may and in doing so be that kingdom builder. As we do this, the nations will become disciples. You may feel I'm stretching here, but consider for a moment how different the world might be if we, as followers of Christ, spent less time feeling guilty about not having brought enough people to Jesus, and instead invested that time and energy in building more of the kingdom wherever we find ourselves.

So finally, what should we do with all saints day as Baptists? Well, remember what I said at the start of this. God is love. God loves each and every person on this Earth and so, being called to live as Jesus lived, we should share that love for every person on Earth. What better day to remember the holiness of every person than a day called all saints? What better day to remember our calling to love one another and renewing our commitment to social justice and equality, by recalling our pledges to preserve and

restore our environment and by working to establish the rule of Heaven on Earth than a day called All Saints? Let us bear these twin callings in mind as we join in communion.

Communion

Brothers and sisters in faith, we come to this table to grow closer to God, neighbour and self. Please read the sections in bold aloud with me.

**God of mercy and justice, be with us.
We lift our hearts to you,
not because we have to,
not because we are supposed to,
but because it's how we respond to your unconditional love,
because it feels good to know we are loved.**

As long as there have been people to tell them,
our ancestors in faith have shared stories of your mercy.
Of how you gave food to the poor, clothes to the naked, and shelter to the lost.

And as long as there have been people to tell them,
our ancestors in faith have shared stories of your mercy.
**Of how you gave freedom to the enslaved,
opportunity to the outcast, and peace to the war-torn.**

You acted with both mercy and justice,
**rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt,
providing them with manna when they were hungry.**

And your people acted with both mercy and justice,
**Like the prophets who cried out to care for widow, orphan, and foreigner,
And those who provided food, shelter, and community.**

You have shared your mercy and justice with us,
not only as gifts to be received from you,
but as gifts that we are to share with the world.
We see this gift most clearly in the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus showed us what a life of mercy and justice looked like:
In mercy, he gave food to the hungry.

In justice, he broke social custom and shared tables with the powerful and the lowly at once.

In mercy, he cared for the sick.

In justice, he broke religious custom and healed on the Sabbath.

In mercy, he had compassion for the poor.

In justice, he spoke out against the Empire that held them in poverty.

In mercy, he washed his disciples' feet.

In justice, he died without protest to expose a corrupt system.

On the night he was betrayed Jesus took the bread and broke it saying 'this is my body, broken for you'. Please take this bread and eat, remembering that we are one in Jesus.

After the meal he took the cup and raised it saying 'this is my blood, shed for you'. Drink, remembering those who have sacrificed for us, and who we have sacrificed for.

And so we are going to sing one more song. It's an old favourite for our congregation because it speaks of the love of God and God's heart for social justice.

Jesus Christ is Waiting

Jesus Christ is waiting,
Waiting in the streets;
No one is his neighbour,
All alone he eats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am lonely too.
Make me, friend or stranger,
Fit to wait on you

Jesus Christ is raging,
Raging in the streets,
Where injustice spirals
And real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am angry too.
In the Kingdom's causes
Let me rage with you.

Jesus Christ is healing,
Healing in the streets;
Curing those who suffer,
Touching those he greets.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I have pity too.
Let my care be active,
Healing just like you.

Jesus Christ is dancing,
Dancing in the streets,
Where each sign of hatred
He, with love, defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I should triumph too.
On suspicion's graveyard
Let me dance with you.

Jesus Christ is calling,
Calling in the streets,
"Who will join my journey?
I will guide their feet."
Listen, Lord Jesus,
Let my fears be few.
Walk one step before me;
I will follow you.

I pray that God's grace would empower us to do justice, to offer mercy, and to do so with humility. God you have given us your Son as an example, and your Holy Spirit as Advocate.
Give us the courage to do your work in the world.

Let's close with the Grace,

May the grace of the lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the holy spirit be with us all, evermore. Amen.