

GPP Reflection for service at St Andrew's Sunday 25 August 2019

Readings: Psalm 103: 1 – 8, Hebrews 12: 18 – 22, 28 – 29 NIV, Luke 13: 10 – 17 GNB

We sing: *Be still for the presence of the Lord*

Be still for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here;
come bow before him now with reverence and fear:
in him no sin is found – we stand on holy ground.
Be still for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here.

Be still for the glory of the Lord is shining all around;
he burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned
how awesome is the sight – our radiant king of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place;
he comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace –
no work too hard for him - in faith receive from him.
Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.

Reflection: STANDING IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

- *trembling with reverence and awe, but obedient and faithful*
- *aware of the value of each human life and open to God's Spirit*
- *our image of God influences attitude and actions*
- *being 'guardian angels' on our turangawaewae*

We do need to practise being still with God, if we want to experience the presence of God, and the power of God moving within and around us. God is here and moving in this place. May you experience the presence and power of God this morning.

Our call to worship today reminded us of God's healing ways, compassion and justice. We were also reminded that God revealed things to Moses and the people of Israel. Moses saw the bush that was on fire and yet it did not burn up. Moses recognised he was standing on Holy Ground when he became aware that God was with him on the wild mountain side. God is everywhere – so every place can be holy ground for us. It is a matter of attitude and understanding. Moses and other Biblical characters who met God in surprising places, trembled with reverence and awe when they became aware of God with them and of God's message for them. Being in awe of God does not mean being afraid – the words 'the fear of God' are a common phrase in Biblical texts but they denote a sense of awe and reverence, not being afraid. Awe is about wonder and respect. In that state of awe and reverence the ancient characters like Moses listened and did what God wanted of them, even if many of them tried to find excuses first – but eventually they were obedient and faithful.

When we recognise that we are standing in the presence of God, everywhere, we can be open to a message from God in any place and through any means – whether that is through the words of the Bible, the words of a friend or stranger, a song we sing or listen to, the thundering of waves on the shore, the vastness of the ocean, the majesty of a forest, the magnificent beauty of a sunset, the amazing flight of a bird, the trusting nature of a child - or just a smile when we need to know that someone cares. God is here and moving among us, and we can experience that if our eyes, ears and hearts are open. We are standing in the presence of God. So what is it that you need from God today and what is the message God has for you?

You may already have been touched by God this morning in words sung or said, in images seen, or in a welcoming smile. Or maybe there is something that resonates with you from the readings we heard. Let's explore them a little.

In the last couple of weeks we have been thinking about faith as we worked our way through some of the letter to the Hebrews with its reminder of many faithful characters from the Bible who, in the face of various difficulties, still trusted God and lived for God. They are examples of obedience and faith. This letter was encouraging Christians who, because of increasing opposition, were in danger of abandoning their faith. Last week we thought about how they were exhorted to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus. Today we heard more from Hebrews but this time the words were about Moses and the people of Israel in awe of God at the sacred mountain in the desert – and the contrast of *but you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. ... you are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, therefore be thankful and worship God with reverence and awe.*

The hymn we sang earlier – *Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God* - expanded those words. They and the images in Hebrews, as well as in the Psalms, and Revelation speak of a city that is not in a particular place on earth but everywhere. The city of God is a metaphor, an image, a picture.

The city and the kingdom that cannot be shaken is the kingdom of God, the reign of God. We have not physically come to Mt Zion, but we are part of the kingdom of God, the family of God. The message of Jesus was all about that kingdom, that different way of life, that sense of belonging to God, to something wonderful and mysterious beyond ourselves - but including us. It is a place for us to stand and to be – to live in the compassionate way of Jesus.

In the Luke reading today we saw that compassion in action. Jesus was in a synagogue, teaching on the Sabbath. He noticed a woman there who was very unwell. Even the fact that he noticed her tells us about his observation and compassion. He stopped teaching everyone through his words but taught them through his actions. Jesus called out to her, *woman you are free from your illness*. Then he placed his hands on her, and at once she straightened herself up – after 18 years of being bent over – and she praised God. To place his hands on her Jesus would have had to move from the pulpit at the front of the synagogue, go past the men seated at the front, and move to where the women were seated separately. No-one there that day could fail to notice what was happening. Being bent over is a symbol of oppression, so that provides another layer of meaning here too.

You heard what happened next: The official, the ruler of the synagogue, got angry. He was indignant – how dare Jesus do this. You can imagine him thinking and maybe saying, 'I allowed him to teach but not to break the Sabbath laws'. He tried to humiliate Jesus by telling the people that if they wanted to be healed they could come on one of the other six days of the week, the days when work was allowed, but not on the Sabbath Day. This is an interesting comment because he was equating the healing with work. He was acknowledging that Jesus was working – and that what he did had worked. The woman was healed.

Remember that it was in the synagogue at Nazareth that Jesus had spoken of what his work was to be. In Luke 4 we have the record of Jesus reading from the prophet Isaiah and making it clear that what Isaiah spoke of was the work Jesus had come to do through the Spirit of God – to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, set free the oppressed. We do not know which synagogue Jesus was in on this occasion recorded in Luke 13, but the news had spread about the work Jesus was doing through the Spirit of God. Here he was freeing a woman oppressed by what people thought of as an evil spirit. She was bent over, crippled and in pain. Jesus healed that pain.

Yet Jesus did more than that – he gave everyone present another taste of what living God’s way, opening up to the kingdom of God, really meant. He showed them the value of each human life. When the Synagogue official tried to say that Jesus was breaking the Sabbath laws by healing on that day, Jesus challenged him and others who were siding with him, and called them hypocrites. *You would untie your animals and take them to water on the Sabbath, this woman too should be released on the Sabbath.* Did you notice how the story ended? - *The answer Jesus gave made his enemies ashamed of themselves, while the people rejoiced over all the wonderful things that he did.* People saw the Spirit of God at work through Jesus. The leaders in the synagogue saw rules and regulations as more important than people. They were not open to seeing the Spirit of God at work. Are we?

Sometimes the way we see things is conditioned by the image we have – and our attitude to life may be particularly affected by our image of God. For those synagogue officials, God was about rules and judgement. The God I know is about love and compassion, not judgement. Jesus showed us through his life that caring for people, noticing their needs, and doing something about them, was the way God wants us to live.

Presbyterian Support does that. It cares for people, notices the needs that are not being met in other ways, and does something about them. Presbyterian Support does all that on our behalf so we need to know what they are doing and support them.

Today we have heard about the wonderful work that Presbyterian Support does through its many programmes – Family Works, Tairawhiti Men’s Programme, Enliven, Tai Chi exercise, and the Guardian Angel project. I see the Spirit of God at work through all the wonderful staff who use their care, compassion and skills to help others, whether each of them recognises that or not. The compassion and skill of the counsellors and social workers who work with children and families affected by violence is crucial to heal them of what is making those families metaphorically bent over and oppressed.

You may have trouble believing in angels but maybe it will help if you can see that God’s Spirit works through all who share that kind of compassion and skill and they become angels to those they work with. An angel is a messenger – a messenger from God with a message of love and practical help. Guardian angels are those who help and support and care. They stand alongside. They stand firm – and they help to give others a place to stand.

There is a wonderful word in the Maori language that encompasses that notion of a place to stand – *turangawaewae*. It is a place to stand strong, a place to belong, a place to feel safe, and a sense of this is my place to be. We might say that it is holy ground and a place to stand in the presence of God.

Everyone working with any of the Family Works programmes is helping to give families and individuals their *turangawaewae* - a place to stand strong, a place to belong, a place to feel safe and a place to be.

May you all stand strong on your *turangawaewae*, and in the grounding of your faith. Stand with confidence in the presence of God. Live compassionately. Be the guardian angels who can support those on the front line working with families in this community.

The Spirit of God is at work everywhere, bringing light and love. We can see signs of love in people all around us every day, we can sense real miracles in lives that have been changed. New life abounds as people live the way of Christ, the way of God.

May God bless you as you live God’s way. Amen.

The choir sings: *No, I've never seen an angel ...*

No, I've never seen an angel with lovely golden wings
harping on about a message from a lofty king of kings.
I've never talked to Gabriel or stepped upon a star,
or seen Saint Peter at the gates, not even from afar.

But I've held your hand and heard your voice,
and seen your signs of love
in the people all around me every day:
when the hungry ones are fed, when the sick are put to bed,
and the hopeless find there is another way.

No, I've never walked on water, or stilled a raging wave;
my water never turns to wine, my porkers all behave.
My loaves and fishes feed just me, my words don't seem to heal;
the dumb don't speak at my command,
the numb aren't helped to feel.

But I've sensed the real live miracles
in lives that have been changed
in the people all around me every day:
when despair is put to flight,
and the darkness turns to light,
and the helpless find the strength to walk their way.

Yes, I've heard the old, old stories, I've sung the ancient songs;
I've celebrated sacraments, I'm sure that I belong
in the line-up of disciples that began by Galilee,
rippled over ocean waters, and was handed on to me.

For the ancient stories come to life,
if I've got eyes to see,
in the people all around me every day:
when the seeds of peace are growing, the justice river's flowing,
new life abounds along Christ's open way.

Rob Ferguson