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***Dear St John's family,***

***Re: This strange gift of confinement!***

I'm not great at waiting. I'm ashamed to confess that I'm the person who weighs up which queue looks the shortest at the supermarket checkout and then spends the next few minutes watching the progress of the queues either side to see if I've made the right choice.

I'm sure none of you will have done that! But the likelihood is that we are all finding this period of confinement difficult. We hanker after a change of scenery, an easing of the restrictions in order for us to be properly reunited with loved ones or the chance to get away from being desk bound and to get on with the work that we love out there in the *parish* (change for your own 'out there').

What I'm reminded of is that in the immediate afterglow of Easter morning Jesus instructed the disciples to wait; or 'tarry' as it says in the King James. They were to wait in Jerusalem (Acts 1:3-4) not moving until they had received a sign.

Their response, like ours, was to want to know more... "*Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*" To which Jesus replied "*It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*"

In the daily briefings from Number 10 yesterday some of the journalist's questions were about signs. When will the daily statistics be a sign that points us towards an easing of restrictions, a restoration of the kingdom of normal?

Neither the Health Secretary nor the Chief Medical Adviser was to be drawn. "We wait and we watch", was the best any journalist could hope for.

Like those first disciples we may be tempted to be waiting for a return to a past experience. They imagined the restoration of Israel much as we might imagine a return to business as 'usual' in Eastbourne.

Or take Jesus' words to Mary on that first Easter morning "*Do not cling to me!*" As Jill explained in her Easter address, like Mary we can cling to a memory. Stephen Cottrell the incoming Archbishop of York puts it this way; "*..there will always be a temptation to cling, to hold...to hang on to all those comforting experiences of where God was for us in the past. But... even as you try to hold him, he is dancing ahead of you with new challenges and new delights.*"

What might those new challenges and delights be? I can't give an answer to that, but it's not hard to imagine that our concept of 'Church' might change in light of our recent experiences.

For the first three centuries the people of God met from house to house and in the open air; their gatherings were small but numerous... ring any bells?! Free from the encumbrance of expensive buildings to maintain they organised themselves to serve the poor, feed the widowed and orphaned and build new communities of faith that could carry the gospel of Christ to a spiritually hungry world.

Now, don't get me wrong, I can't wait for the time when we can meet again under the same roof at St John's. I can't wait for a time when we can dispense with social distancing and share the peace as brothers and sisters gathering around the same familiar communion table. But I am also more and more convinced that this confinement is preparation for the new challenges and delights that the Spirit may be calling us into.

Of course, it's a future that might be scarily beyond our current imagining. But if it is of God, then it will be glorious enough for us to say: "Come Holy Spirit, come Spirit of the Living God and breathe new life into us your Church; equip us to serve"!

As you wait, as we all wait during this period of confinement, will you make that your prayer? Will you join me in asking God to expand our hearts and our minds to be ready to respond with a willing and lively and sacrificial faith to the new thing he wants to do? Not simply a return to the kingdom as usual but to the restoration of a Kingdom centred Church going out into world with a renewed sense of purpose and of power.

With my love and prayers for the journey ahead

Giles

Morning Prayer meets every day but Sunday at 9am – it would be lovely if you could join us. If you would like to join us then please let us know and we will send you the details.

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Although the church building is not open at the moment the office is running from home – the office telephone number is being diverted to Rachael, so if you need anything then please contact her on **01323 738761**. We'd love to keep in contact with you all.

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On Sundays our website is hosting 8am BCP and 10am family worship services at <https://www.stjm.org.uk/st-johns-live>.

If you don't have access to the internet and would like to receive these in another format then please do let us know.

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Several home groups are still meeting during this time – if your group is not meeting or you are not part of a group then now is the perfect opportunity to join one! Please email Nick Pendry on [nick.pendry60@gmail.com](mailto:nick.pendry60@gmail.com) or contact Rachael in the church office.

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There are some great prayer & other resources on our website. These are updated regularly so please keep checking back!

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Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May is testimony Sunday – it would be great to hear from as many of you as possible! Please ring the office or email Giles – [vicar@stjm.org.uk](mailto:vicar@stjm.org.uk) – if you are happy to contribute.

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## RECENT REFLECTIONS FROM MORNING PRAYER

### MORNING PRAYER ON GOOD FRIDAY – REV'D GEORGE FISHER

#### **Psalm 69; Genesis 22.1-18; John 19.1-37**

Our readings are long so I will not say too much about them as they speak for themselves.

Genesis 22 marks the God of Abraham out as distinct from other gods and religions in that he does not require human sacrifice which was common then but provides the sacrifice himself. But it also prefigures Good Friday where God himself provides the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, his own Son Jesus. Psalm 69 identifies with all human suffering and today we remember that Jesus fully enters into our humanity to suffer all that we do. And John 19 takes us to the foot of the cross which our later services will do further.

I was reminded, in preparing for this, how strange the biographies of Jesus are in that a huge proportion of the writings centre on his death. This is in stark contrast to most biographies. The God who enters into our humanity and suffering and dies for us is what helps to make sense of suffering for me. And we preach, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, Christ crucified. The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. In our prayers today, let's bring to the Lord those situations and people on our hearts but let us pray that the message of the cross will be proclaimed this Easter in spite of the lockdown and the restrictions that places on us, that the message will not be diluted or muted. Let's pray for our own clergy and all church leaders as they seek to use the internet and other ways to bring the message of the cross to our communities and this nation and all nations.

### TUESDAY 14TH APRIL - REV'D GILES CARPENTER

#### **Psalm 112; Exodus 12.14-36; 1 Cor 15.12-19**

An exodus is, as we probably know, a journey.

Our Old Testament reading this morning focuses on the POINT OF DEPARTURE for the journey that ISRAEL are about to take as they leave persecution and slavery in Egypt.

As journeys go exodus's are often costly ones. Journey's into freedom often are.

In 2015 the world was reminded of the tragic human cost of exodus.

That reminder came when photographs of the body of a 3 year old boy washed up on a beach in Turkey appeared on our screens.

His name was Alyan Kurdi and he was drowned whilst fleeing with his family from the war in Syria.

That death was first and foremost a tragic and devastating thing for Alyans family.

We can only begin to imagine their grief.

But the image of that little boy's body washed up on that Turkish Beach was also a turning point.

His tragic and untimely death would do more to mobilise concern for the plight of refugees than any statistics could.

Last week our Holy Week readings reminded us how God's people had flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

They'd gathered to remember the dangerous journey their ancestors had taken and the deliverance that God brought to them. It was an opportunity to celebrate freedom.

Of course the sad reality was that in one sense they weren't really free.

Over time the tyranny of Egyptian rule had been replaced by the equally cruel tyranny of Rome.

What they needed and what we all need is true freedom.

Of course we want freedom from the tyranny of things like modern day slavery and virus's that paralyse world economies but the freedom we all need most is from the tyranny of the human heart... our own sin and selfishness.

That is of course the freedom that Christ has won for us!

His whole life was an exodus... the journey from heaven to earth was costly... living life with us was costly and that Passover meal in that upper room was the point of departure for the most costly part of that entire journey...

A journey to Calvary but also to our liberation...

By his stripes we are healed, we are restored and forgiven.

And by his resurrection (which Paul is at pains to emphasise is fundamental to our faith) we have a new hope.

That hope should inspire us to remember our exodus, our journey culminates not in this world but the next. That should change our perspective. We should be heavenly minded but with our feet firmly on the ground.

In other words we live to advance God's kingdom here on earth whilst also knowing our citizenship is in Heaven. In all our daily decisions we should work for a fairer world and for justice for all those who experience slavery and persecution today. But equally our belief in resurrection should also inspire us not to love this world so much that we cling to it as if it were all that there is.

Amen

**Psalm 113; Exodus 12.37-end; 1 Corinthians 15.20-28**

Today's psalm is the first of a group known as the Egyptian Hallel –Hallel means praise - that were used at the yearly Passover.

This would have been sung before the Passover meal, so is probably one of the last psalms Jesus sang before his passion.

It's a song of praise, a reminder of the Exodus, and a forth-telling of the extent of God's sovereignty in earth and heaven. It points back to the Old Testament Exodus, and forward to the greater Exodus that is to come.

The Psalmist declares that God is great, God is active and that God lifts up the down-trodden – He brings freedom and he brings blessing.

So as we turn to Exodus we see a people on the move, moving out of the slavery of Egypt towards the freedom of the Promised Land. We have the benefit of knowing that they did not always grasp their freedom: they moaned and rebelled and wanted to turn back, yet God kept calling them onward. He did not let go of them or give up on them when they turned from him.

He had called them into freedom, and in his love he resisted all their attempts to head back into slavery.

Paul tells us of the freedom that Christ has bought for us– freedom from death through Jesus' resurrection - the first fruits of resurrection from death for all who place themselves in Jesus.

Like the Promised Land for the children of Israel it is something we have not yet experienced.

It is beyond our imagination and something we can only dream of and anticipate.

As we sometimes struggle to grasp our future freedom in the light of reality - in lockdown and bewilderment – our own wilderness - maybe we can look at the children of Israel and not be too hard on them.

For there are times when we too want to turn back to what is familiar, when we long for the security of what we knew, even though it might have had its share of problems.

The children of Israel learnt that God was with them, that he would not desert them, that he went with them through tough times and provided for them, and that his call to freedom stayed true – eternal freedom bought for us all by Christ.

So let us look to the psalm – to that call to praise, and remember that this is the Lord who raises the poor from the dust, who gives the barren woman a home and makes her the mother

of children and he has promised that death our enemy is defeated – that God may be all in all, and that we might live in the freedom of his risen life. Amen.

## MORNING PRAYER, 16<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2020 – BEN SLEEP

### **Psalm 114; Exodus 13.1-16; 1 Corinthians 15.29-34**

Sometimes, the lectionary provides us with readings that are clear and precise and don't require too much analysis or interpretation in order to grasp what scripture might be saying. And then sometimes the lectionary gives us readings like today, where we battle through the text, wondering to ourselves whether we're speaking metaphorically or literally about sacrificing the first born males of the Israelites, or whether Paul, in Corinthians, is advocating baptism by proxy for people who have already died.

I think we need to step away from attempting to literally interpret what's going on in these passages, and instead examine the overarching points that are being made.

We meet Paul in what appears to be the midst of an argument about Corinthians who are attempting to get baptised on behalf of others – even those, it seems, who have already died. And I think Paul's response is a similar response to the ones we have when we find ourselves in the minutiae of absurd arguments. I wonder if you've ever had similar discussions with your children, where you start on what you think is one valid point and before you know it, you've disappeared down a rabbit hole of more and more absurdity, until you're desperately trying to maintain your original argument by using it to justify whatever bizarre turn the conversation has now taken? I think the Corinthians are, in many ways, so far from the path that Paul has tried to lead them along, so corrupt in some of their behaviours, that Paul has reached the end of his tether. And when it comes to the fundamentals of faith, of baptism and belief in the resurrection, even these they've managed to corrupt, by turning baptism into some sort of magic wand. Some sort of trick that can be performed to grant them eternal life; a trick that can even be performed on behalf of others. They've ripped out the heart of what baptism really is: a deep, truthful and foundational relationship with God, and replaced it with some absurd ritual that acts as a cure all. On top of that, they're denying the resurrection - and this, I think, is where we walk in on Paul's argument. He's using their own logic against them to make a greater point. If there's no resurrection, why are you bothering to get baptised? Why are you bothering to try and get baptised on behalf of others?

He's not justifying their behaviour – he's pointing out the absurdities of their actions. And why's he doing this? Because Paul is always about getting back to the basics. And that's what we need to take from this passage. The core fundamentals of our faith cannot be corrupted, because if they are, we fall too easily into reliance upon ritual and works to try and reach God. And those things never put us right with our heavenly Father, because our heavenly Father has already provided the best way to be right with Him and that's by being in *relationship* with Him. We don't need tricks or special codes. We need to recognise what Christ has done for us, ask Him into our lives and be transformed by His Holy Spirit that takes up residence in our hearts. And when we've done that, we're baptised as an act of recognition of what God has *already* done, rather than merely undertaking a ritual to gain a spiritual get out of jail free card.

Now, we may look at the Corinthians through Pharisaic eyes. ‘Thank heavens we’re not like them,’ we might think. But how often do we find ourselves depending on our own strength, our own spiritual sticking plasters, rather than on the relationship that is offered by God to face all things through His strength rather than our own?

That, I think, is what our passage teaches us this morning. If the fundamentals of our faith are not in the right place, then what are we doing? And who, ultimately, are we serving? God or ourselves?

## 17<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2020 – PETER STONE

Yesterday Ben reminded us of the need to accept that we cannot move mountains in our own strength, but only in the Lord’s. The opening of Psalm 115: *Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness* – reaffirms that point. On Wednesday Jill explained that Psalms 113-118 are part of the Halell group of Psalms recited by Jews at times of special feasts. This psalm may have been the one Mark refers to in 14:26, the hymn the disciples sang at the end of the Lord’s supper before they went out to the Mount of Olives. Perhaps the last hymn Jesus sang on earth. The psalmist tells us to trust in the Lord, we are assured of God’s blessing. No point in worrying about the idols of other nations. We must praise the Lord while we can.

Trusting in our own strength, thinking we are always in control, is a way of thinking easy for comfortable well off modern man - until something like the corona virus comes along. Then we are brought up short. Many years ago I remember doing an English comprehension with some 12 year olds about the Great Plague of 1665 and 1666 in London. The children were partly amused and partly horrified by the pictures of the watchmen in their extraordinary masks. At parents’ evening a father said that his daughter had been upset by the whole business of the plague. He hinted that this was perhaps an inappropriate subject for his sensitive daughter to have to deal with. Couldn’t happen now, could it Mr Stone? “Science would deal with it now”, he said. “No point in worrying the kids”. How wrong he was!

The Exodus reading also tells us how much we need to trust God, even in the most challenging circumstances. The Lord has just led the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt, providing them with a pillar of cloud to guide them in the day, and a pillar of fire at night. But Pharaoh has changed his mind, he’s not letting this huge free work force escape. Meanwhile the Israelites are moaning to Moses. *We wanted to stay in Egypt. Better to serve the Egyptians as slaves than to die in the desert.* Those Israelites certainly liked a good winge. Later in the Book of Numbers, when they’d got fed up with the Lord’s manna, they remembered the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic they’d had in Egypt. Nothing like a good moan. But, back to Exodus 14, the Lord had events in hand. As Pharaoh and his army approached, Moses told his people *“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Lord will fight for you, you need only be still.* And so they were delivered.

The Corinthian reading is an amazing one, Paul’s brilliant picture of ourselves in everlasting life and light. Just one last comment I’d like to make. The three readings help us to see the

majesty and power of God, also the mystery – if we trust him. The Israelites of the Old Testament were unsure and divided about the nature of life after death. Verse 17 of the Psalm: *It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to silence.* Of course, they lived before the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But things have changed; Christ has risen. We can share in that glory if we trust in the Lord. Verse 49 of the Corinthians reading: *And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man (Adam), so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven (Jesus).* We can Praise the Lord – now and in eternity. Amen

## SATURDAY 18<sup>TH</sup> APRIL – MYRTLE MARTIN

Today we reach one of the great climaxes of the book of Exodus and a pivotal event in the history of the nation of Israel. The Hebrew slave tribes and families are gathered together at the Red Sea and begin their journey from slavery under the Egyptians to their transformation into the nation of Israel. It's a moment of birth, beginning with the blood of Passover, continuing through fear and that sense of 'There's no turning back now!' Their life is never going to be the same again! We watch the Hebrew people as they walk through the parted waters and we feel the pain as we witness the destruction of the oppressor. It's a story of deliverance, one of the great themes of the book of Exodus as we read how God shapes a nation, first delivering it from slavery. They are walking into a new relationship with the God who is not only the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but is going to reveal himself to them through Covenant and by his Presence with them.

Exodus is a defining moment – the defining moment of the story of a nation, one which the Jews would write into their history and their poetry and look back to for hope during the time of the Babylonian exile. It's a moment which is remembered to this day in the celebration of Passover. It has been the inspiration for modern freedom movements. Most notably, Martyn Luther King used the Exodus narrative in many of his speeches. We could even compare the modern exodus of refugees from Syria, a people desperately seeking to escape oppression.

But the Biblical Exodus story stands unique because in it, God is the instigator, the Divine planner, and the executor of his deliverance plan for his people. Although it deals with a people group in the usual meaning of the word Exodus, we can make comparisons with our own individual lives today. The Christian life is about freedom and deliverance. God is about freedom! Freedom is the reason for our salvation.

Romans 8:2 – We have been set free from the law of sin and death.

Galations 5:1 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

John 8:36 If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

God's Word is talking here about spiritual freedoms and ultimately, they are of even greater importance than physical and earthly freedoms. Our new life in Christ is described as a new birth – no going back and we will never be the same again! It was won for us by Christ's blood shed on the cross. And we mark this passage into a new life by passing through the waters of baptism. God has become for us not just the God of our fathers, or our social circle, or even our church. We are born into a growing relationship with him, in which we are part of a new Holy Nation that belongs to Him.

Passing through waters is often a metaphor for going through difficult times in our lives. Not least of those are our final times when we face passing from this life. We are hearing so much about death in these last few weeks, the numbers are just incomprehensible. Each of those is a precious life taken by this virus, and that's without considering the deaths from other causes. Our reading in Corinthians reminds us that Death will be swallowed up in Victory! Paul refers back to Isaiah here, who goes on to say that in that day when God will wipe tears away from all faces, we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.

Did you notice that little verse in the middle of our Psalm today, verse 15.

'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints'

That is our ultimate salvation, our final exodus from the constraints of this life to the wonderful freedom he has in store for us!

## MONDAY 20TH APRIL - REV'D GILES CARPENTER

### **Psalm 19; Exodus 15.1-21; Colossians 1.1-14**

"The problem with clergy is that they are a bit too cat and not nearly enough dog!"

These were the opening words of the speaker at a conference I attended last year... it got everyone's attention....

You've probably already got the picture in your minds... but just in case her point wasn't clear, she was suggesting that, a bit like your average moggy, clergy have a reputation for being a little cold and stand offish.

What she went on to advocate for was that clergy could do with being a little more pleased to see people.... they need to actively move towards others and want to make the connection. If you've met either my enthusiastic dogs you'll know exactly what she meant.

Now, I'll let you make your own judgement about whether Ben, Jill and I are more cat or dog ...

But what is undeniable is that Paul in his letter to the church in Colosse bounds towards them with warmth and enthusiasm. HOLY AND Faithful brothers in Christ... grace and peace to you... we have heard of your faith and love.. etc.

He doesn't hold back. His words are full of genuine affection and affirmation.

And bear in mind, this is for a community that he has never met before and has only ever heard of through his friend Epaphras.

In line with Catherine's message about hospitality yesterday, I suspect there are immediate lessons here for us about the way we are to greet others with sincere love. To treat others as members of the same multi ethnic, international family. A family, that Paul says is growing rapidly all over the world as the gospel spreads.

One of the joys for me about our morning worship recently has been the opportunity to share in worship with our new friends from St Michael and All Angels.

In some cases we won't have met each other outside of zoom but what instantly binds us together is not the World Wide Web but the world wide household of faith. We are not just friends we're brothers and sisters in Christ; children of the same Heavenly Father.

And as children of God we should have a natural spring that bubbles up within us. A spring which, whatever our temperament or character, should make us more instinctively dog than cat!

Paul describes it in verse 5 as a spring that has as its source the gospel; the good news of God glorious plan of salvation.

Salvation that God first revealed to his people Israel as he brought them safely through the waters of the Red Sea in Exodus which, as Myrtle reminded us last week, prefigures our own salvation as God takes us through the waters of baptism, dying to our old selves and rising to new life in Christ.

When we know this gospel, when we have received the hope that it contains the outworking of that, the fruit, the spring that comes from this source should, Paul says, be faith and love.

Importantly this faith and love should not be dependent on our circumstances or indeed limited by them.

Paul is writing from his own form of lockdown, a prison cell in Rome.

But despite this lockdown like both our psalmist and Moses and indeed Miriam Paul's heart

is full of thanksgiving to the God who is more than capable of delivering and rescuing him.

For Paul however this gratitude is not that God has delivered him from the bonds of his physical prison but that he's counted worthy to suffer for the gospel. What's more despite his physical constraint his ministry is testament to the truth that, with the wellspring of faith and love, there are no limits to the power of the gospel to continue spreading around the globe.

As we think of our own lockdown it occurs to me that there are at least two lessons for us here.

The first is to remember that no amount of confinement should constrain our own faith and love that springs from the hope we have in the gospel. And that, in turn, this should put a song of praise in our own mouths. We should declare our own thanksgiving to God who brings us salvation and who is more than capable of delivering us safely through this present trial.

But the second is this... and it's really a wake up call...it's to wake up to the reality that maybe we've all been a little too cat.

Despite our relative freedoms, as church, we have social distanced ourselves for far too long, both from those within our own family, the household of faith, and those that we are supposed to hold out the gospel to.

We have been guilty of expecting people to come to us, largely on our terms.

There's a real irony in this Lockdown. That irony is that it has been the catalyst for us to be far more dog.

Firstly, it's given us the impetus to reach out to our own family and affirm and encourage one another as two churches with the same father and the same gospel.

But even more importantly it's given us fresh impetus to be more dog with our friends and neighbours reaching out with a new and bounding energy and enthusiasm and like all those that God has rescued in the past, doing do with a new song of salvation like honey on our lips.

AMEN

## TUESDAY 21<sup>ST</sup> APRIL – REV'D JILL PREECE

### **Psalm 8; Exodus 15.22-16.10; Colossians 1.15-end**

We're one month on, and people are complaining: grumbling about the leaders and about the conditions everyone has to live under.

I could be describing our circumstances today – or I could be talking about the people of Israel in the reading from Exodus: both are equally true. We are one month into lockdown, and the Israelites were one month into their wanderings in the wilderness.

And they were heavily into complaining.

First they complained about the bitter water and then they complained about the lack of meat. Of course, as slaves they were highly unlikely to have had meat regularly, but that doesn't stop the grumbles!

The first thing to notice is that God provided the Israelites with their daily bread (and quails!). He gave them enough, not less than they needed, but not more than they needed.

Simply enough.

God will provide us with all that we need.

Sometimes we doubt that: we feel that we don't have the resources we need. God's promise is the same, he will rain down his bread from heaven for us.

But this provision was also a test: would they trust him enough not to go scrabbling after extra each day or would they try to stockpile and grab extra 'just in case'?

In one sense God was reminding his people that although he has saved them, brought them out of Egypt, normal life continued. They still need water and food, just as we do.

In a deeper sense he was reminding them that, just as we do, they needed to trust and obey God as he called them forward to a new life.

He provides for our daily needs, and I don't mean only the physical needs of food and shelter, although I recognise that in these times that can be an area needing real trust for some.

God calls us to trust him as we keep moving forward, not looking back to what has been left behind, but lifting our eyes and looking ahead, to where we see the glory of the Lord appearing in the desert.

And for that we can look both to today's psalm and to that glorious passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians – what a wonderful description on the glory of God, revealed to us in Jesus.

If you are not already in the habit of sitting with a Bible passage and allowing God to speak to you through it then may I encourage you to begin here, there are such treasures to be found

here: the supremacy of Christ, the assurance of our place in his household through his death and the promise of being able to stand holy and blameless before God.

And Paul reminds us again that we are not there yet: we have to continue in our faith. That means that with Christ in us, the hope of glory, we trust, we proclaim, we teach one another, that we may stand together mature before God.

Amen.