



The Methodist Church

Ripon and Lower Dales Methodist

Circuit:

Worship at Home – 18 September 2022

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Wherever you are sharing in this act of worship, you are welcome.

The earth is the Lord's, for he made it:
Come, let us adore him.
Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness:
Come, let us adore him.
The mercy of the Lord is everlasting:
Come, let us adore him.
Lord, open our lips.
And our mouths shall proclaim your praise.

Hymn:
Darkness Like A Shroud Covers The Earth;
Evil Like A Cloud Covers The People.
But The Lord Will Rise Upon You,
And His Glory Will Appear On You-
Nations Will Come To Your Light.

*Arise, Shine, Your Light Has Come,
The Glory Of The Lord Has Risen On You!
Arise, Shine, Your Light Has Come,
Jesus The Light Of The World Has Come.*

Children Of The Light, Be Clean And Pure.
Rise, You Sleepers, Christ Will Shine On
You.
Take The Spirit's Flashing Two-Edged Sword
And With Faith Declare God's Mighty Word;
Stand Up And In His Strength Be Strong.

Here Among Us Now, Christ The Light
Kindles Brighter Flames In Our Trembling
Hearts.
Living Word, Our Lamb, Come Guide Our
Feet
As We Walk As One In Light And Peace,
Till Justice And Truth Shine Like The Sun.

Like A City Bright So Let Us Blaze;
Lights In Every Street Turning Night To Day.
And The Darkness Shall Not Overcome
Till The Fulness Of Christ's Kingdom Comes,
Dawning To God's Eternal Day.

Prayer:
Holy, Holy, Holy is God, our sovereign Lord,
Who was, and is, and is to come!
Before Your unfathomable mystery, O God,
All eloquence of form and language is facile.
We cannot encompass You,
For You encompass us.
So we fall silent,
And let the child deep within us
Be content in the knowledge
That we are known, wanted, and loved
By One infinitely greater than we shall ever
be.
Amen
(From the Book of Common Order of the
Church of Scotland, 1994, pp446-447)

Reading: Jeremiah 8: 18 – 9: 1
¹⁸ You who are my Comforter¹ in sorrow,
my heart is faint within me.
¹⁹ Listen to the cry of my people
from a land far away:
"Is the Lord not in Zion?
Is her King no longer there?"

"Why have they aroused my anger with
their images,
with their worthless foreign idols?"

²⁰ "The harvest is past,
the summer has ended,
and we are not saved."

²¹ Since my people are crushed, I am
crushed;

I mourn, and horror grips me.

²² Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then is there no healing
for the wound of my people?

9 ^[b]1 Oh, that my head were a spring of water
and my eyes a fountain of tears!
I would weep day and night
for the slain of my people.

Reflection

'Is there no balm in Gilead?'

It's become one of those phrases or sayings from the Bible that many of us know and can quote, but can't exactly place. But often we get it slightly wrong; because we might know the song that takes this verse. And there's a subtle difference between the Bible verse and the song...

The Bible verse tells us that the prophet said, 'Is there no balm in Gilead?'

But the song says:

There is a balm in Gilead

to make the wounded whole,

there is a balm in Gilead

to heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged

and think my work's in vain,

but then the Holy Spirit

revives my soul again.

There is a balm in Gilead

to make the wounded whole,

there is a balm in Gilead

to heal the sin-sick soul

Do you hear the difference? Today I want to take us to the place where we can hear that difference – not just in the words, but in the theology, in the hope, in the faith, in the experience. Because I think it's a difference we all need to hear.

The verse comes from a place in the story of Jeremiah where he asks, 'Is there no balm in Gilead?' He asks this question – he wrenches this cry from his heart – because he is not at peace with God and the world.

He is not at peace because he is so dismayed by the suffering of the people. Jeremiah is at the point of wondering whether there really is any healing balm for his people. He says,

'My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.

For the hurts of my people I hurt..

Is there no balm in Gilead?'

So what's the story? Why was he moved to ask this question, to cry out to God...?

Gilead was a place in Palestine known for producing the herbs and spices that made a healing balm, the kind that people relied on and swore by. Perhaps you remember the bit in the story of Joseph where he was thrown down a pit by his brothers and then sold to some Ishmaelite merchants. The story tells us that those Ishmaelites were carrying balm from Gilead. It was something very special in the ancient world. The balm of Gilead was a bit like Germolene or Calpol, the kind of thing that people turned to if there was a need, the kind of thing we grandmas swear by. In times when skin was ravaged by hot sun and dry winds, by hard labour and a tough life, healing balm was highly valued.

Jeremiah knew that the people of his time were really suffering. He was feeling the hurt of his people, their grief and pain. For the hurts of my people I hurt, he says. Is there no

balm in Gilead? The famous healing balm of Gilead becomes a kind of symbol for anything that might heal deeper hurts and pains still. Jeremiah is doing what Jewish prophets and teachers were unafraid to do – he was railing against God, challenging God, berating God. Is there no healing for the people?! Do they have to go on hurting? Have the doctors run out of ointment or painkillers? Have you nothing to give them for their pain? Is there no balm in Gilead?

And I imagine we know a little what that feels like.

The song doesn't say 'Is there no balm in Gilead. It says 'There is a balm in Gilead..' There *is* balm in Gilead'. For the song and those who sing it the balm is real, the balm is promised, and it is promised and demonstrated in Jesus. There is balm in Gilead, to heal the sin sick soul. There is balm.

So you are thinking perhaps – 'Who is it who can sing this simple song of such faith in the face of pain and suffering?' What kind of people found they were able to sing that there *is* balm in Gilead when even the great prophet Jeremiah had days in his life when life was so miserable that he could only cry out with the kind of question that wonders whether anyone could possibly believe that such balm was still there? And you might conclude that the kind of people who can sing that kind of song – must be people for whom life has gone well, people who are not much troubled by pain or suffering, people who are comfortable and privileged, a bit naïve perhaps.

But no. The wonder and the miracle of faith is that the people who have sung this song, the people who have made it their anthem have been people who have suffered a great deal, who have been subject to injustice and trauma, people who have hurt and grieved and wept. Let me tell you about some of them. And let us see what their faith bears witness to.

There are days in all our lives when we can only manage the kind of frustrated screaming of Jeremiah who feels the pain of his people

so much that he can only shout at God and say, 'Is there no balm in Gilead?!'.. But then perhaps there are wonderful, grace-filled, rare moments when we can hear, as though in the distance but with increasing insistence, the songs of those who know there is balm in Gilead, to heal the wounded soul, those who know that justice will come one day, that hope is real, that even though we will die we will find life again. There is balm in Gilead.

Those who find this balm tend to find it not because they have money and privilege and power. They don't find it because they are ignorant or naïve about how messy life really can be. They don't find it on their own, or in the seclusion of their own thoughts. They find it walking the streets with others who share their pain. They find it in church. They find it given to them by the most amazing grace – from the hands of a God who hurts when they hurt and who loves them so much that God desires that all shall be saved. They find it with each other and with God. In profound and close community, in faith shared and doubts expressed in safety, in commitment to a better world, in defiance of a world that tries to persuade us that it is all about the market and the money, they discover that there really is balm in Gilead. But these people are not *they*. This is *us too*. As we share faith wherever God leads us, as we give ourselves to each other and to the world, we will find that there is balm in Gilead, there is balm for us, whatever we face today.

Hymn:

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Come unto me and rest;
lay down, thou weary one, lay down
thy head upon my breast.'
I came to Jesus as I was,
so weary, worn and sad;
I found in him a resting place,
and he has made me glad.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Behold, I freely give
the living water, thirsty one;
stoop down and drink and live.'
I came to Jesus, and I drank
of that life-giving stream;

my thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
and now I live in him.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'I am this dark world's light;
look unto me, thy morn shall rise,
and all thy day be bright.'
I looked to Jesus, and I found
in him my star, my sun;
and in that light of life I'll walk
till trav'ling days are done.

Prayers:

Gracious God, you are the source of all wisdom and in a time in which so many seek direction we pray that you would inspire the hearts and minds of your Christian people that we might teach and guard the faith which has held fast the lives of generations before us. We pray for our Christian leaders that the Word of God would dwell richly in their heart that they would be led by your spirit to knit together your people in the bonds of love.

We pray for the leaders of the nations, and for those in authority under them. We pray for respect and co-operation to be shown between those of different views, that peace may rule in the nations. Protect those who are called upon to serve in situations of violence, give their leaders wisdom and right discernment to care for all of those entrusted to their authority.

We pray for our church. Give to us as a Christian community the willingness to give of ourselves in welcome and help us to serve one another as Christ has served us.

We pray for those who lack faith and who do not have an awareness of your love. Open their ears to hear your voice and open their hearts to the knowledge of your love in Christ.

We pray for those bowed down with grief, fear or sickness and mention their names before you. May your living Word bring comfort and healing to all those in need.

We give thanks for all those who have died in the faith of Christ and we rejoice

with them and all your saints, trusting in the promise of your word fulfilled. Lord of life, hear our prayer, and make us one in heart and mind to serve you with joy for ever.

Amen

Hymn:

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
be all else but naught to me, save that Thou art;
be Thou my best thought in the day and the night,
both waking and sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word;
be Thou ever with me, and I with Thee, Lord;
be Thou my great Father, thy child let me be;
be Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Be thou my Breastplate, my Sword for the fight;
Be Thou my whole armour, be Thou my true might;
Be Thou my soul's shelter, be Thou my strong tower,
O raise Thou me heavenward, great power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise;
Be Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Be Thou and Thou only the first in my heart,
O high King of heaven, my Treasure Thou art.

High King of heaven, Thou heaven's bright Sun,
O grant me its joys, after victory is won;
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be Thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

Benediction

May the goodness of the Creator and the grace of the Saviour
guide you in the power of the Holy Spirit.
The blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit grant you and give you his peace now and always. Amen.