

SERMON: 12 March 2017 – Rev Dr Brenda Robson

“The Lord is near”

Isaiah 44:1&2

Philippians 4:4–19

I knew early in the week that I would preach from Philippians 4 and through the week my mind was drawn more and more to four simple words in verse 5 – **The Lord is near.**

God wants you to know today that he is near.

What does that mean? Well, like many apparently simple verses in the bible, there is more than one meaning. What did Paul mean when he wrote these words and what did the Philippians understand by these words?

The early church in the years after the resurrection expected Jesus to return again soon, in their lifetime. And so they might take this phrase to mean, the second coming of Christ is near, he will come back soon, the time for his reappearance is near.

But I think more importantly to them and to us 2000 years on, is the fact that the Lord is near, here and now through his holy spirit. The Lord is present with us.

The dictionary defines “near” as close, not far off, within reach and Jesus is all of these things, then and today.

There are times when we have a heightened awareness of the nearness of God, when we are in awe of what he does and who he is.

Sometimes God appears to people in supernatural ways. I have shared in the past that my sister became a Christian on the morning our mum died five years when her living room became flooded with the brightest light and warmth on a dull, overcast winter day when there was no sun. God let her know that he was near.

A woman shared with me just last week that God appeared to her in exactly the same way one day when she was distraught and anxious – the brightest unnatural light flooding in her through her window and the complete assurance that God is near.

Most of us don't have the joy of seeing God in this way, at least not often, but he reveals himself to us nevertheless in many, many ways from our first breath to our last breath.

When Poppy was born and took her first breath I am sure that James and Sarah looked at her in awe and wonder, this perfect little being with tiny fingers and

toes, eyes that see and ears that hear and probably vocal chords that were loud and clear! God would have rejoiced with them in the birth, in the new life.

And if anyone has been present at the other end of life's journey, at the final breath, again there is often a tangible sense of the presence of God, as heaven invades earth and Jesus comes to take his brother or sister home. Jesus says that in his father's house are many rooms and he went to prepare a place for us and he promised to come back and take us to be with him. No-one goes to the Father except through him. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. And so at that final breath we know that Jesus is near.

And what about all the time in between, as we journey through life?

As a church, we believe that the holy spirit is especially near as we celebrate the sacraments of baptism and communion. The word sacrament means the visible sign of the reality of God's presence and of his grace. And so the holy spirit was here when we baptised Poppy. In fact, I said the words "**Christ is present with us in this sacrament; it is he himself who baptises.**" For a minister that is actually an awesome declaration, moving and exciting and empowering.

Jesus is with us when we gather round the communion table and share in the sacrament of the Last Supper. We often say these very words in the blessing of the bread and wine "**Lord Jesus Christ, present with us now.**"

But Jesus is not just with us in the sacraments, fortunately for us he is with us through his holy spirit at all times and he wants us to know this and acknowledge this and take strength and comfort from his nearness. He does want to share in our happy times, when we rejoice and are glad. But he especially wants to be with us in our hard times. Jesus has such a heart for the troubles and tribulations of his people. He sees our struggles and difficulties. Where would we be without Jesus to see us through?

Of course, God cared equally passionately for his people before Christ came. The psalmist knew God's presence in his darkest days.

Psalm 46:1 – **God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.**

Psalm 119:151 – **Yet you are near, O Lord, and all your commands are true.**

Psalm 145:18 – **The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.**

God promises his people through the prophet Isaiah that he knows each one of us by name and he says we are his. He says "**When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire you will not be**

burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour."

God never revealed himself completely to his people in Old Testament times – he appeared in signs and wonders, in cloud and fire, on far off mountain tops. When God wanted to be nearer to his people, he did a new thing. He took on flesh and became man. People could see him and touch him and hear him.

Jesus was and is kind and compassionate and concerned about our stress and anxieties, about the burdens we carry and the sleepless nights we have through worry.

Matthew 11:28 Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 6 – Jesus says do not worry about your life.....God knows all that you need. Seek him and he will give you all you need. Maybe not all you want, but all you need.

Ann Voskamp is a Christian writer who wrote this week about the anxieties that keep us awake at night. You know the feeling. You go to bed exhausted but you can't fall asleep because of all the things racing round in your mind. Or you waken up at 3 am. Zing! Totally awake. In the dark and silence, your anxieties can seem overwhelming. Ann said –

What about when we can't sleep because our storms just don't seem to stop? Jesus walks right across our waves to us, pulls us close and whispers: "The winds obey Me. So the one thing I ask of you again and again is: Do not be afraid. Trust Me." And there's this nodding right in the face of the gales: If even the blasting winds obey Him -- then our storms aren't, cannot be, bigger than our God. Jesus didn't just calm one storm -- He can calm all our storms. It's like a steady rocking into a sure rest right there on our waves: 'Do not be afraid. Your Father is the Maker of the universe --so you never have to be afraid.' Then there's the exhale... and a giving it to all to God so there's getting some rest... the deep, carrying rest of God who can calm every known storm.

The calm in the middle of the storms of life, the calm that Jesus brings because he is always near.

A friend Lorna Tweedie came here a couple of weeks ago and led a seminar on prayer. She brought with her a picture called Peace in the Midst of the Storm which was painted by Jack Dawson about 20 years ago. It shows a raging stormy sea and water cascading down a cliff and half way down the cliff a little bird has found safe refuge on a ledge in the midst of the storm. It illustrates the power of Jesus to keep us calm and safe and sheltered in the midst of storm.



Peace in the Midst of the Storm by Jack Dawson

Philippians 4 gives us five promises to encourage us in our struggle with anxiety and fear and stress –

Verse 5 The Lord is near

Verse 7 The peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Verse 9 The God of peace be with you

Verse 13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me

Verse 19 My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus

Now on one level these verses do seem amazing encouragement. We can achieve peace and succeed in doing hard things and deal with our anxiety. But actually these verses on their own can make an anxious person more anxious. The desire to achieve these things can lead to striving to find contentment, striving to find peace of mind, striving to achieve things that are really too hard for us in our own strength. And when we inevitably fail to find that peace and contentment and success, then we feel worse, more anxious, more stressed.

The answer to this dilemma is found in verses 5 and 6 –

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Pray....and then you will find.

Prayer is so important. If Jesus is near to us through his holy spirit, then we can draw near to him by speaking to him, by praying.

James 4:8 says **“Come near to God and he will come near to you.”**

Now we cannot get any nearer to God in the physical sense because he is always near but we can get nearer to him spiritually when we pray.

Jesus frequently withdrew from the crowds to a quiet isolated spot to pray and be near his father in heaven, spiritually close. And so this is a model for our personal daily prayers, alone with God in a quiet time.

But the New Testament model for the church at prayer is one of coming together, praying with each other, praying for each other.

Following the resurrection but before Pentecost we read that the followers of Jesus **“all joined together constantly in prayer along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers.”**

After Pentecost, at Acts 2:42, it says that the people of the early church **“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”**

On an occasion when Peter was miraculously released from prison, he **“went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark where many people were gathered and were praying.”** (Acts 12:12)

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians **“Be joyful always, pray constantly, give thanks in every situation for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”** (I Thessalonians 5:16)

There are some 40 references to the praying church in the New Testament. That is why we as a church here have a weekly prayer meeting and why we have a monthly prayer meeting specifically related to our church during vacancy. It is why we pray in housegroups and in small prayer groups in people’s homes on a regular basis.

It is why we offer prayer ministry at the end of the service where people can come for personal prayer. Sometimes people come in without having a specific reason, they just feel the need to draw near, to receive a blessing from God, and it is often amazing just how God speaks blessing into a relevant area of that

person's life. It isn't necessary to tell the person praying for you what your circumstances are or your problems are, you can simply ask for a blessing from God and then be blessed!

There are people here who pray every day. There are people here who pray occasionally especially when the going is tough and we need something from God. There are people here who haven't prayed to God for a long time or who have never prayed to God. God is near to all of you. It does not matter what your track record is, he is near to you.

If God feels more distant today than he might have felt in the past, be assured that God has not moved!

We get excited when our broadband speed is promised to increase. Ratho is close to getting super speed broadband and we are all waiting to tap into it. Connecting to God has always been super speed. He is an ever present, ever near source of power and strength and hope and courage and peace and whatever else we might need to tap into in the ups and downs of our daily life.

The text for today is easy to learn and easy to remember – **“The Lord is near.”** I pray that you will remember it often, until your last breath.

AMEN