

# CHRIST CHURCH URC

## SEVENOAKS

Littlecourt Road, Sevenoaks, TN13 2JG

Email: [enquiries@christchurchsevenoaks.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@christchurchsevenoaks.org.uk)

Website: [www.christchurchsevenoaks.org.uk](http://www.christchurchsevenoaks.org.uk)

### **He sets the prisoner free**

Self-isolating feels a little like being in prison. Our movement is restricted. Visits from our friends are limited. It can all make us seem even more alone.

Jesus understood himself as the one who would set the prisoners free.

***“He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners.”***

We know that the experience of being a prisoner is as much a mental state as it is physical. There are many ways we can be trapped. And we long to be free. Free from fear and worry. Free from some dark memories that continue to trouble us. Free from unhappy relationships. It would be so good to have some of these heavy chains unlocked and the prison door unlocked.

The message of the gospel is that Jesus has come to set us free in all sorts of ways. And we are asked to believe it and to act on it. Here are some promises that are good to reflect on.

***The truth will set you free.***

***If the Son sets you free you are free indeed.***

During these dark days of confinement let us ask God to liberate our hearts and minds to know his freedom even as we live behind closed doors.

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### **The joy of the Lord is your strength**

Doom and gloom can settle on us like a heavy fog blown in from the sea. For some of us it is quite claustrophobic. We find ourselves robbed of our normal views and the sight of community. Hemmed in on every side we long for the open skies and distant prospects.

A sense of gloom settled on the inhabitants of Jerusalem when they discovered how far they had drifted from the word of God. They began to weep. But their leader, Nehemiah, said to them:

***‘Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ (Nehemiah 8:10)***

Habakkuk describes the response of his own heart in a time of natural devastation:

***Though the fig-tree does not bud  
and there are no grapes on the vines,  
though the olive crop fails  
and the fields produce no food,  
though there are no sheep in the sheepfold  
and no cattle in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,  
I will be joyful in God my Saviour. (Hab3:17,18)***

In some way that lies beyond our understanding, ‘the joy of the Lord’ seems to lift the heavy fog and allows the sun’s light to shine through and bring warmth to our whole being. We regain perspective and understanding. Our spirits are lifted.

In these days of isolation and social distancing it is so easy for the gloom to settle. Allowing a divine joy to enter our minds and hearts is a decision that we can play a part in. Paul wrote to the Philippians:

***Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. (Phil4:8)***

This is surely the time for us to set our minds on the good; on all God has done for us; on our family, our friends, our church; on the promise of Spring; on the faithfulness of health workers; on our own health and of those we love. Let us practise the wonderful art of being thankful.

Paul encourages us:

***Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!***

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### **This Is My Friend**

Friends tend to show up when things go wrong. They appear in the dark times, bringing us a card, a bunch of flowers, a meal. We recognise the depth of their friendship when we become aware of just how much they have given of themselves. Jesus is quoted by John as saying:

*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.  
(John 15:13)*

At a time of crisis like the one we are now going through it is moving to see so many, particularly in the health profession, putting themselves at serious risk, for the sake of others. No wonder we come out onto our balconies at night clapping. At its best their action is a glimpse of the love of God. Paul puts it this way:

*Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:8)*

To develop the analogy: at Easter we come out not with the applause of our hands but with the worship of our hearts. We express our thanks for that young heroic life freely given over for the healing of our souls. We receive with joy the new life that is poured out on us through Jesus' glorious resurrection. And we delight in calling the young rabbi from Nazareth, our friend. We now have a friend in high places, seated in glory at the right hand of the living God. We have a friend at whose name every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. To believe is to do no more than welcome him as friend.

*Here might I stay and sing,  
no story so divine;  
never was love, dear King,  
never was grief like thine.  
This is my Friend, in whose sweet praise  
I all my days could gladly spend.*