

7th April 2024 – Morning Service

Andy Haynes

Call to Worship - Psalm 133:1 – 3

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

Our first hymn reflects the words in the first verse of that Psalm as it speaks of joining our hearts in unity as we gather here.

StF 30 – Jesus stand among us

- | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) Jesus stand among us At the meeting of our lives, Be our sweet agreement At the meeting of our eyes; | 2) So to You we're gathering Out of each and every land, Christ the love between us At the joining of our hands; |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

*Ch) O, Jesus, we love You,
So we gather here,
Join our hearts in unity
And take away our fear.*

Graham Kendrick © 1977 Thankyou Music CCL No. 515642

Prayer

Lord, we lift up our hearts to You in love and adoration today, and praise you for your greatness, for You are the great and mighty King and all glory and honour belongs to You. Words cannot describe how awesome You are. There is no one above You. You are the Creator of heaven and earth, and everything belongs to You. You are holy and righteous and You rule your people with justice. We praise You because You are faithful and true, and we know we can always trust in You. You keep all Your promises, Your word gives us life, and it is a light unto our path. You are soothing to the troubled soul, and we bless Your name forever. We bow before You in reverence and praise, for You are the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. You are gracious and merciful, and You are always ready to forgive Your children when they sin against You.

Lord, help us to meditate on Your unfailing love, which You have poured out into the world. Your love for us is so great that You sent Your only Son to die for our sins. As John 15v13 tells us 'Greater love has no man than to lay down his life for his friends.' Now we can know forgiveness because of what has been made possible through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who was willing to face the horrors of the cross because He loved us so much. God, our loving Father, God, our refuge and strength, God, the giver of all good gifts we praise You forever for Jesus, who taught His disciples and ourselves the prayer we pray together as we say:-

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 348 – He is Lord

- 1) He is Lord, he is Lord;
He is risen from the dead, and he is Lord;
Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess
That Jesus Christ is Lord.
- 2) He is King, he is King;
He will draw all nations to him, he is King;
And the time shall be when the world shall sing
That Jesus Christ is King.
- 3) He is love, he is love;
He has shown us by his life that he is love;
All his people sing with one voice of joy
That Jesus Christ is love.
- 4) He is life, he is life;
He has died to set us free and he is life;
And he calls us all to live evermore,
For Jesus Christ is life.

Anonymous

Reading: John 20:19 – 31

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.' A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Our hymn to follow the reading says 'come see His hands and His feet' as Thomas requested.

StF 272 – From heaven you came

- 1) From heaven You came, helpless babe,
Entered our world, Your glory veiled;
Not to be served but to serve,
And give Your life that we might live.
- 2) There in the garden of tears,
My heavy load He chose to bear;
His heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not my will but Yours', He said.
- 3) Come see His hands and His feet,
The scars that speak of sacrifice,
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered.
- 4) So let us learn how to serve,
And in our lives enthrone Him,
Each other's needs to prefer
For it is Christ we're serving.

Graham Kendrick © 1983 Thankyou Music CCL No. 515642

Sermon

Often referred to as ‘doubting Thomas’, I once heard him described as ‘A demanding sceptic’. Therefore I thought that’s where I ought to begin my research. So off I went to the library and I asked the librarian on duty if she had any books with ‘sceptic’ as the subject, to which she replied ‘No sorry.’ So I said, ‘Well if you don’t mind, I’ll just take a look for myself?’ ‘Be my guest, you sceptic,’ she replied. 8 hours later just as the library was closing I returned to the desk to confirm her information was indeed correct. You see I hadn’t believed her and I just had to satisfy myself she was right! So I returned home and decided to go modern – I embraced technology for all it’s worth and googled ‘sceptic’. That was interesting because I got a load of NHS websites about causes, symptoms, diagnosis and treatment – so I pressed the ‘back’ button and scrolled down the list of results getting some alternative site concerning sewer pipes and tanks, etc.

That really puzzled me until I realised I spelt it wrong and missed the ‘C’ out! So then I thought ‘forget all that – let’s just see what the Bible has to say about it all.’ So let me ask you now what you think of Doubting Thomas? Do you think he was misunderstood? Unfairly judged? Or was he really a ‘demanding sceptic’ as someone once put it?

Our passage today begins with ‘On the evening of the first day of the week’. Now the Jewish week ended on the Sabbath which was a Saturday. So the first day of the week was the Sunday. Now Jesus rose on the Sunday, so we can conclude that Jesus didn’t waste much time in appearing to His disciples. On the day He is Risen he meets with them. And they were all together. That’s important too – the horror that had taken place with their master being arrested and crucified meant they could have scattered – but instead they remain together. This tells us that the fellowship of believers is vitally important – especially in difficult times. It is meeting together in worship that enables us to be strengthened, encouraged and supported in times of need. Our opening Psalm speaks of unity being pleasant and good! It’s why to this day many persecuted Christians risk everything to meet together with their fellow believers. We should always be thankful to God for the freedom we have to meet together in this way. I wonder if the disciples had been scattered if Jesus would have made 11 visits that Sunday night? For doesn’t Matthew 18 v 20 tell us “*Where 2 or 3 gather in my name there am I with them.*” Another powerful reason for us to regularly meet together in church – as indeed many do - for worship, fellowship, prayer and Bible study.

And our passage confirms that the disciples were afraid, they feared what the Jewish leaders would do to them, especially as rumours had been spread about them stealing the body of Jesus – these lies were told so that the Jewish people didn’t believe the resurrection! And because the disciples were frightened, we are told that they locked the doors. But a locked door doesn’t stop Jesus, for He enters in and stands among them saying ‘peace be with you’. What do you think these disciples were now thinking? What was the expression on their faces? Perhaps a look of horror? Maybe a look of unbelief? Or was it a look of relief and great rejoicing?

And how would we have reacted do you think? What would the expression on our faces have been if we had been in their shoes? After all, crowds had seen Jesus die – that was true enough. And although these disciples had witnessed Lazarus being raised from the dead, it was Jesus who performed that miracle –and now He was dead Himself – so how could this be? Plus, the door was lockedIs it a dream? Is it a nightmare? Is this what fear has done to them? They must have thought ‘is everyone else seeing what I’m seeing or am I going out of my mind?’ What on earth is happening? They must have been open mouthed with shock! Why that conclusion? Because of what Jesus did next. After He said ‘*Peace be with you*’, verse 20 tells us that Jesus then ‘*showed them His hands and His side.*’ Now that they’ve had the proof they needed, and only now are we told that ‘*The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord*’

And that’s what John’s gospel is all about – being sure, being certain, being beyond any doubt. And if we meet with the living Christ, will He not have the same effect on us? Filling us with true joy, whatever the circumstance. But like the disciples, Jesus wants us to be gathered in His name. Like the disciples we have to be gathered as one. Like the disciples we have to believe what we are shown to be true.

Because Jesus reveals Himself to us today if we are ready to receive. For we worship a living Saviour who is as real today as He was then. And He is waiting to draw alongside all those who seek Him in spirit and in truth. Verse 22 of today's reading: *'And with that He breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit".'* It's all there in these few simple verses and it says so much - the content is so rich - and as with all of the gospels it's not a history lesson but as relevant to us today as it was to the disciples then. It's just that we don't always see it like that - if we did we would all be reading and studying scripture like tomorrow depended on it - because it does! Climate change, energy crisis, political turmoil, this nation's huge debt problem, the troubles in Gaza, the war in Ukraine; the world's in a mess - the world needs Jesus!

We all need Jesus. As the song says: *'Jesus is the answer, for the world today, above Him there's no other - Jesus is the way'*. Men and women in their wisdom have no answers. The world has rejected God and has decided to go it alone. The world is full of scepticism. People want scientific proof. They get hooked on conspiracy theories, such as Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code. But they won't accept truth because they are blind to it. So what about our subject today? What about Thomas? Where does he fit in? Matthew says in chapter 28 v 17 *'When they (the disciples) saw Him (Jesus), they worshipped Him; but some doubted.'* Not just one - but some! Mark says (16 v 11 - 14) *'When the disciples heard that Jesus was alive and that Mary Magdalene had seen Him, they did not believe it. Afterwards Jesus appeared to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the disciples, but they did not believe them either. Later Jesus appeared to the eleven as they were eating He rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen Him ...'*

Luke tells of the women coming back from the tomb to tell the disciples Jesus had risen, and in Luke 24 v 11 it says *'But they did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense.'* So it appears that none of the disciples believed that Jesus was alive and had risen from the dead - not just Thomas. However, Thomas is the one who was missing on the first occasion. I wonder where he was? Had he popped to the Co-op to fetch a pint of milk? Or was he too afraid to be with the rest of them in case they were discovered and arrested? Or was he depressed with the events of the last few days and needed time alone? We don't know. But what we do know is this - that he is the only one who makes a determined and profound statement of unbelief when in John 20 v 25 he is quoted as saying *"Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my hand into His side, I will not believe"*

So how determined are we to NOT believe the things of God? How determined are we to maintain our lack of faith? How determined are we to harden our hearts before the living God? To explain away the miracles of Christ! To re-create a God that suits us! To do away with sin by accepting anything goes! How far are we prepared to fall? Well fortunately for Thomas, Jesus returned a week later. Notice how Thomas had to wait a whole week. That must have gone on forever - his mind turning things over again and again. But also note how gracious the other disciples are to have this unbeliever as part of their group still. He was not ostracised because he did not believe them after they'd seen the Risen Lord. And so we have to accept that people are in differing stages of faith, and we need to be patient and encourage them by example and with love.

So notice how Jesus appears before them all once again, but it seems it is especially for the benefit of Thomas this time, as He says to him in verse 27 *"Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."* Jesus had voluntarily shown the disciples His hands and His side. But now Jesus offers doubting Thomas the chance to see His wounds and place his hand into His side - just as he had requested in his hour of doubt and unbelief.

And to quote Bible commentator Matthew Henry: *"The exalted Redeemer will ever show himself open-handed and open-hearted to all his faithful friends and followers. When Christ manifests his love to believers by the comforts of his Spirit, He assures them that because he lives they shall also live, and he shows them his hands and his side."* In other words, you can feel in your earthly suffering the suffering of Christ as He draws near to those who call upon His name in faith and belief this very day.

And just as Jesus drew near to Thomas in his hour of doubting, so Jesus will show the same mercy and compassion in those times when we lack faith and doubt Him! For He will not leave us or forsake us, even when we turn away in unbelief, but will call us to come home, to put our trust and faith in Him, to fall on our knees and cry, just as Thomas did, *'My Lord and my God'*. Amen

Our next hymn speaks of this love and joy and the change it brings as we receive Christ:-

StF 503 – Love Divine

- 1) Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.
- 2) Come, almighty to deliver,
Let us all thy life receive;
Suddenly return, and never,
Never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve thee as thy hosts above,
Pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
Glory in thy perfect love.
- 3) Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee:
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise!

Charles Wesley

Prayers of Intercession

Lord God we pray now for the nations of the world, for governments and leaders. May all who hold positions of authority be moved to seek justice and peace and to serve those they lead with integrity and care. Loving God, this day we continue to pray for the people of Ukraine, and all the countries of the world ravaged by war. We especially think of those in Gaza at this time and pray for peace between Israel and Palestine. Give to our world and its peoples the peace that comes from above, that they may find Christ's way of freedom and life. May all who are in positions of leadership be courageous enough to seek peaceful and just solutions. We remember all who suffer as a result of war or man-made disasters.

Lord in your mercy – **Hear our prayer**

We pray for our own country and government, that party politics and individual ambition would never be an excuse for failing to serve the good of society. We pray for our own local communities, and pray for the work of the churches, that together they may be centres of hope and healing in a broken world. Almighty and loving God, we pray for the witness of the church, the body of Christ, that it will be Spirit led and empowered by your love in sharing the good news of Jesus effectively to build your Kingdom on earth. We pray for our own circuit that you will lead the work within it and bless those who give of their time and resources to further the cause in this our land. We pray, as always, for persecuted Christians everywhere, who are courageous in the faith, standing firm in their beliefs and suffering as a result. We ask that you draw very near to them in their troubles, and bring them peace.

Lord in your mercy – **Hear our prayer**

Loving Father God, we pray people who are sick, bereaved, lonely and those worried for the future and how they will cope. We long for them to know the comfort of your love and care in their time of need and distress as we think particularly of those known to us, in our church, our families, our neighbourhoods, our work places etc. We bring them all before you now, asking that you will touch those sick in body, mind or spirit, the sorrowful and the anxious, the guilt ridden and the depressed, soothe their pain, cleanse and restore them. Thanks be to you, Our God, for your saving love, made known to us in Jesus Christ.
Lord in your mercy – **Hear our prayer. Amen**

Our closing hymn is the ever popular Easter one, loved by many:-

StF 313 – Thine be the glory

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son, Endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won; Angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away, Kept the folded grave-clothes where thy body lay: | 2) Lo, Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb; Lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom; Let the church with gladness hymns of triumph sing, For her Lord now liveth, death hath lost its sting: |
| Ch) <i>Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son, Endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.</i> | 3) No more we doubt thee, glorious Prince of Life; Life is nought without thee: aid us in our strife; Make us more than conquerors through thy deathless love; Bring us safe through Jordan to thy home above: |

Edmond Budry

Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now, and forever more, **Amen.**