

A service for Low Sunday – 7th April, 2024 (StF)

Call to worship: 1 John chapter 4 verses 9 to 12

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No-one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Revd. Brian Wren for Easter Day 1968 and was sung at Hockley Congregational Church, Essex where he was the minister and followed the assassination of Martin Luther King ten days earlier. The last verse is his prayer for social justice which cost Dr. King his life. The lovely words of the second stanza remind us that Jesus is not only for yesterday, but today and tomorrow, too. We shall sing hymn number 297, 'Christ is alive! Let Christians sing;'

1. Christ is alive! Let Christians sing;

His cross stands empty to the sky:

Let streets and homes with praises ring;

Love drowned in death shall never die.

2. Christ is alive! No longer bound

To distant years in Palestine,

But saving, healing, here and now,

And touching every place and time.

3. In every insult, rift and war,

Where colour, scorn or wealth divide,

He suffers still, yet loves the more,

And lives, where even hope has died.

4. Women and men, in age and youth,

Can feel the Spirit, hear the call,

And find the way, the life, the truth,

Revealed in Jesus, freed for all.

5. Christ is alive and comes to bring

Good news to this and every age,

Till earth and sky and ocean ring

With joy, with justice, love, and praise.

© Brian A. Wren (born 1936)

Let us pray. When I say, 'Lord in your mercy,' please respond with 'Hear our prayer'.

God our heavenly Father, we come to offer you our praise and adoration, for you are the Creator and sustainer of life throughout the universe. In your boundless, everlasting love, you have sought to reconcile us to you, sinful though we are. Your glory shines brighter than the sun and your mercy refreshes our souls like gentle rain. To you belong all honour, glory, power and praise.

Lord Jesus Christ, we offer you all our praise and adoration, for you brought us salvation on the cross at Calvary, where you atoned for the sins of the world and opened the gate to everlasting life.

Glory to you, Sacred Spirit, for you are our guide, our strength and inspiration in our discipleship. Come to us now and breathe new life into us.

Mighty Lord of life and love, you have overcome the old order of sin and death through the life, death and resurrection of your Son, Christ Jesus. Through him all things are made new and so we come to offer you our worship and adoration today.

Almighty God, hear and accept our thanks for the many blessings we receive from you, for your undying love and faithfulness. Lord, forgive us when we have yielded to hopelessness and fear, for surrendering to despair when the path of discipleship is challenging. Pardon us when our faith is weak and we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

Lord, in your mercy **hear our prayer**

Merciful God, forgive us when our love for you and our neighbours is marred by our selfishness and pride. Forgive us for words and deeds that wound, rather than heal and for our indifference for the needs of other people. Breathe new life into us, renew and restore us so our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death. Kindle the embers of our faith into a mighty flame, so we play our appointed part in your kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy **hear our prayer**

Loving God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only pardoned us, but invite us to walk with you once more. May we serve our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives honour you in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

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.

I like John Mason Neale's translation of Jean Tisserand's hymn, 'O sons and daughters, let us sing', but I have found few congregations able to master its melody, so, when Revd. George Cloke asked me if I could find a suitable alternative tune, I adapted it to be sung to Philipp Bliss' "Gethsemane", which I am sure you all will recognise – and if you sing 'Alleluia! What a Saviour!' I shan't be offended! Let us sing the hymn on our sheets, 'Sons and daughters let us sing'....

**1. Sons and daughters, let us sing!
King of heav'n, most glorious King,
Over death rose triumphing.
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**2. When his foll'wers met in fear,
To them came the Lord most dear;
Saying, 'Peace be on all here.'
Alleluia! Alleluia**

**3. Thomas first the tidings heard
That they'd seen the risen Lord;
But he doubted in their word.
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**4. 'My pierced side, O Thomas, see;
Look, my hands, my feet,' said he.
'Doubt no more, but trust in me.'
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**5. No more Thomas then denied,
Seeing hands and feet and side.
'You're my Lord and God!' he cried.
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

**6. Blest are they who have not seen,
Yet whose faith has constant been.
They eternal life shall win.
Alleluia! Alleluia!**

{Jean Tisserand, translated by John Mason Neale et al.} Adapted 31st March, 2002 by M. Rider

***In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and its needs. When I say,
'Your kingdom come', your response is 'Your will be done'. Let us pray.***

Most gracious and amazing God, we rejoice in this beautiful, wonderful planet on which we live as well as in your sustaining grace. However, we are aware of the world's brokenness, more often than not as a result of human pride, selfishness, cruelty, avarice or indifference. We recognize that you have blessed us throughout our lives and so we ask you to help us to play our part in heal some of the world's brokenness, however small our role may be. We know, too, that while our powers are limited, no situation is beyond yours, so we ask you to intervene by warming the hearts of people who possess power and influence to act for the wellbeing of all people.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

We pray for our church, the churches in our Circuit, neighbouring Circuits and, indeed, the World Church. In the name of the risen Lord, guide us how best to serve our communities and help us to find new ways, to not only preach Good News but to live it day by day; to be a light of hope in a self-centred, sin-darkened world. Remember, in your mercy, our leadership teams, granting them vision, good judgment and courage in taking our churches forward in a sustainable way. Grant all of us faith to face the future with confidence and to serve you steadfastly, following your Son's example.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done**

Heavenly Father, we pray for peace to be established in the world, for an end to fighting in Ukraine, in Gaza / Palestine, Haiti and Somalia and for peaceful resolutions to disputes between other countries before they escalate into warfare. Teach national leaders to seek the ways of mercy and justice through which lasting peace may be established, to negotiate and compromise instead of using force against opponents. Lord, remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression. Grant them all the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives. Grant them healing in body, mind and spirit.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Lord of power and might, guide those who govern us and their advisors to adopt policies that will bring us safely through these challenging times while meeting the needs of vulnerable groups. Give them courage and wisdom to do what is right, whether or not it is popular, to set aside self-interest for the wellbeing of all.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for people who are sick in body, mind or spirit, for all who are who are living with a dementia and those who care for them. We pray for everybody who is in any kind of need or trouble. May they receive the care and support they require and may they also experience your presence in their suffering. In a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help.....

Lord, may we be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we offer friendship and practical support to them, but we pray that you will enfold them in the warmth of your love, so they receive healing, hope, courage and enduring peace.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Abba, Heavenly Father, we pray you to accept and answer our prayers, not as we ask in our ignorance, nor as we deserve in our sinfulness, but as you know and love us in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We shall praise God as we sing a hymn written in 1936 for “Children Praising” by Revd. William Hamilton, a former General Secretary of the World Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. Hymn number 316, ‘When Easter to the dark world came,’

**1. When Easter to the dark world came,
Fair flowers glowed like scarlet flame: Chorus**

*At Eastertide, at Eastertide,
O glad was the world at Eastertide.*

**2. When Mary in the garden walked,
And with her risen Master talked: Chorus**

**3. When John and Peter in their gloom
Met angels at the empty tomb: Chorus**

**4. When Thomas’ heart with grief was black,
Then Jesus like a king came back: Chorus**

**5. And friend to friend in wonder said;
‘The Lord is risen from the dead!’ Chorus**

**6. This Eastertide with joyful voice
We’ll sing, ‘The Lord is King! Rejoice!’ Chorus**

© W.H. Hamilton (1886 – 1958)

The Gospel reading is John chapter 20 verses 19 to 31

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, 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 his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Now Thomas (called 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 it.”

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 did many other miraculous 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 Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. Amen.

We shall sing a hymn by Revd. Samuel Medley, an Eighteenth Century Pastor at Byrom Street Baptist Church in Liverpool, though as a young man he had no time for God than John Newton of ‘Amazing grace’ fame. I mention John Newton, as he was a friend of Samuel’s father. Samuel served in the Royal Navy until he was seriously wounded. It was whilst he was being patiently tended back to health by his pious grandfather that Samuel found Christ and served as Pastor of Baptist Churches in London and Liverpool. This hymn makes one of the greatest statements of faith at Easter. We shall sing hymn number 303, ‘I know that my Redeemer lives –’

**1. I know that my Redeemer lives –
What joy the blest assurance gives!
He lives, he lives, who once was dead;
He lives, my everlasting Head.**

**2. He lives to bless me with his love;
He lives, to plead for me above;
He lives, my hungry soul to feed;
He lives, to help in time of need.**

**3. He lives and grants me daily breath;
He lives, and I shall conquer death;
He lives, my mansion to prepare;
He lives, to lead me safely there.**

**4. He lives, all glory to his name;
He lives, my Saviour, still the same;
What joy the blest assurance gives,
I know that my Redeemer lives!**

© Samuel Medley {1738 – 1799}

Sermon ‘Stop doubting and believe!’ John 20:27

I often wonder why John wrote an embarrassing story about fellow disciple, Thomas, as a result of which Thomas has been known as ‘Doubting Thomas’ for two thousand years. I can only presume that Thomas was willing for the episode to be recorded, for the story makes an important point, for although we know the expression that **seeing is believing**, Jesus told Thomas, ‘**Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.**’ We live in a society when our faith and particularly the resurrection is often challenged by unbelievers, so anybody can be filled with doubt in certain circumstances, but we ought never to be afraid when our faith is challenged, provided we wrestle with the issue that faces us, for questioning can actually strengthen our discipleship.

If you think Thomas was a weak, or half-hearted follower, please remember that after Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb at Bethany, it was Thomas, not Peter, who urged his fellow disciples to follow Jesus to Jerusalem even if they had to die with him, when the rest of them felt such a journey was unwise, to say the least. Although Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph, within a week the disciples’ dreams were shattered. They had expected Jesus to lead a rebellion against the occupying Romans, but instead

Judas betrayed the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane, the remaining disciples fled and even Peter lost his nerve after he was challenged at Caiphas' palace when he tried to find out what was happening, so he denied even knowing Jesus three times.

Try to imagine the feelings of the followers in that locked room in Jerusalem: their dreams had turned to dust and ashes; the man they believed was the Messiah had been crucified like a common criminal and only some of the women and John went to watch, as women and boys were deemed too unimportant to be challenged. Imagine the guilt the eleven felt for having let Jesus down and for being too afraid to show their face at his crucifixion. Even the recounting of the death scene would have added to their trauma, so the next two days must have been a nightmare for them. The great adventure seemed to be over and they were fugitives from the Sanhedrin and the Temple Guard. What had begun in glory seemed to have been reduced to a shambles with the one they had thought God's anointed sent to a cursed death.

Then, early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene caused an upset by first claiming that Jesus' body had been taken from the tomb and, later, that she'd met the risen Lord. Even though Peter and John had run to the tomb to determine what had happened, nobody seemed willing to accept Mary's claims, possibly because she was a woman – women could not testify by themselves in a Jewish court of law – but probably because she had a troubled background before she met Christ.

It is uncertain why Thomas was not in that locked room but, while he was out, Jesus suddenly appeared inside as the others ate their supper. I suspect Thomas was running an errand, or trying to contact friendly Judeans who could smuggle the followers out of the city. Whatever the case, Jesus blessed the disciples and disappeared before Thomas came back. Naturally, the disciples were still ecstatic when Thomas returned, but when they told him Jesus was alive, he was outraged. He may have thought they were mocking Mary Magdalene, or that they were suffering from some kind of mass-hysteria, but most likely he felt snubbed: **“What is wrong with me that the Lord came while I was out and blessed the others, but not me?”** I can understand his frustration on top of everything he had to take in that week and his feeling that when you were dead, you were dead and that was the bitter end, hence his declaration, **‘Unless I see the wounds in his hand and side and feel them, I will not believe it!’** He'd had so much bad news that talk of resurrection seemed too good to be true.

I can well imagine that Thomas sulked all week, reasoning that if Jesus had risen, he would have appeared to everybody and not missed him out. However, a week to the day after he had appeared to the disciples, everyone was eating supper when Jesus appeared to them again. Thomas' face must have been a picture, especially when the Lord invited him to put his fingers in his wounds. With the evidence before him, Thomas fell to his knees and exclaimed, **‘My Lord and my God!’** Jesus did not rebuke him, but simply remarked that those who believed the resurrection without seeing him would be blessed. Naturally, John, the gospel-writer, used these words to encourage his audience some fifty or more years after Christ was raised from the tomb. ‘We walk by faith and not by sight’, is John's message; hence the importance of the Thomas narrative.

You may well ask how we can believe if we do not have physical proof? Read the gospels, then read Acts and ask yourself what made a small group of uncomprehending, insignificant weaklings become a band of unstoppable evangelists when the Holy Spirit filled them? It was the truth that Jesus had taken away their sins by dying at Calvary and that God had raised and exalted him. To declare Jesus was the risen Lord would result in arrest by the Romans and almost certain death. If his followers had not witnessed the resurrection, or have been convinced by other witnesses, why else would

so many have died for their beliefs? After all, while some people may live a lie, they will not give their lives for something they know is untrue.

The risen Lord challenges us all to answer his call, for he shows that God has the last word. Even when Jesus seemed weakest and most vulnerable, unable to brush away the flies that tormented him as he hung on the cross, his love was and is stronger than the hate and evil of this world. Yes, undoubtedly the world faces many challenges, but change is possible if people of goodwill work together. Look at the way that an 'impossible' peace was forged in Ireland; consider how the Iron Curtain collapsed and South Africa became a rainbow nation. Think of the work being done by relief agencies in war zones, sometimes at the cost of their lives. Consider foodbanks, holiday clubs that provide activities and meals for children who would otherwise go hungry and organizations that work for social justice.

Christ is alive and his Spirit can help us make a difference, if we will open up and let him. We are not being challenged to perform a Herculean task, just to play our part, however small it may be, in God's kingdom. Set aside self-doubt, trust in the Risen Lord, for nothing is impossible if we are united in prayer, love and action, guided by our Saviour and friend. As Jesus said, **'Stop doubting and believe!'** Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Noel and Tricia Richards. Noel was born in Llantrisant, near Cardiff in 1956 and was inspired to become a hymn-writer and composer after he saw Graham Kendrick at Colston Hall when Noel was fifteen. He married Tricia in 1978 and they have complemented one another in producing several albums of fine hymns and worship songs. Hymn number 293, 'All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord;'

**1. All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord;
Who can compare with the beauty of the Lord?
For ever he will be the Lamb upon the throne:
I gladly bow the knee and worship him alone.**

**2. I will proclaim the glory of the risen Lord,
Who once was slain to reconcile us to God.
For ever you will be the Lamb upon the throne:**

I gladly bow the knee and worship you alone. © Noel (b. 1955) & Trish Richards (b. 1960)

Benediction.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.