

23rd April 2023 – Morning Service

Olwen Meller

Call to Worship

The theme for our service today is the appearance of Jesus to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The risen Jesus joined them on the road - explained the scriptures to them and then revealed himself in the breaking of the bread. The risen Jesus journeys with us too and we have the same means of recognising him

StF 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,
Christ 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.

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Opening Prayers

Risen Lord, we come before you this morning to worship and to praise you. Yours is the power that reaches every human heart. You understand our ways. You speak to us in both our sorrow and our joy. You match your step to ours and lead us on.

Risen Lord, yours is the power that sweeps through the church. You come to bless us and to judge. You come in compassion and challenge. You come to affirm and you come to change our foolish ways

Risen Lord, yours is the power that stretches to the ends of the earth. You span the nations in your glory and your power. You hear the call of every tongue. You live within the swirling cultures of our time.

Risen Lord, come with power today, touch hearts and lives and every church and make this world the Kingdom of our God.

Prayer of Confession

Heavenly Father, we confess that we have not been the people you meant us to be. We have not loved you with our whole hearts and we have not loved our neighbour as ourselves. Forgive us Heavenly Father and help us change our ways so that we may be better fitted to serve you and all with whom we come into contact.

God our Father, you gave yourself to the world in Jesus to make a way for us to reach you. Now as the body of Christ may we give ourselves in service, proclaiming the good news of your love and being your people in the world. **Amen.**

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.**

Reading: Acts 2:14a & 22-28

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: 'Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him: "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.'"

StF 82 – O Lord my God

- 1) O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed!
 - 2) When through the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
And hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze;
 - 3) And when I think that God His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die -- I scarce can take it in.
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin:
 - 4) When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home - what joy shall fill my heart!
Then shall I bow in humble adoration
And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art!
- Ch) Then sings my soul, My Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, My Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!*

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Reading: Luke 24:13-35

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognising him. He asked them, 'What are you discussing together as you walk along?' They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, 'Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?' 'What things?' he asked. 'About Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied. 'He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body.

They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.'

He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going further. But they urged him strongly, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, 'It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.' Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.

StF 303 – I know that my Redeemer lives

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| 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.
He lives, my everlasting Head. | 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.
He lives, to lead me safely there. |
| 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.
He lives, to help in time of need. | 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!
I know that my Redeemer lives! |

Samuel Medley

Sermon – The Emmaus Road

The story of the two disciples on the Emmaus road is one of the loveliest stories in the Gospels – but how does it connect with us? I wonder if you can cast your mind back to a time when you met with a stranger. Can you remember how you felt – pleased? Anxious? Fearful? Embarrassed? Maybe your first day at a new school, or when you started a new job. A new neighbour moves in next door or a new minister comes to your church. How do you begin to get to know them? What makes you want to get to know them better? Is it the way they are dressed? Or their words? Or their eyes? Maybe it's 'je ne sais quoi' or as we say in English, I don't know what, but, slowly, for some reason you decide this is a person you can trust and that you want to get to know them better. In the same way, Cleopas and the other disciple came to feel at ease with the stranger and learned to trust him as they walked along together.

Luke is the only one of the four Gospel writers to include this story. It is a story that reveals to us – not only something about who we are – but how Jesus opens our eyes to see him for who he is and about how we can come to know him. The journey to Emmaus is not only a literal journey but is a spiritual journey as well. On one hand it recounts the story of two disciples who after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus walk seven miles from Jerusalem to their village of Emmaus. But it is also the story of how their eyes were opened to recognise Jesus for who he really is. Although the disciples knew who Jesus was they did not recognise him. They knew a lot about him, they had been witness to all those things that had happened in Jerusalem, they had heard – no doubt on many occasions – the things that Jesus had testified about himself and yet they were not able to recognise him when they met him.

There is a painting by the Dutch painter – Rembrandt – of Jesus sitting at table between the two disciples. The painting tries to capture the rapture on the faces of the disciples at the moment they recognise Jesus. There was a guide whose job it was to show Rembrandt's painting to visitors at the museum where it was hung. He always began by telling them the story behind the picture, the story we have read in today's Gospel reading. Sadly, for many years he told the story mechanically and without conviction. Then his wife whom he loved dearly developed cancer and died a slow, painful death. He could see absolutely no meaning in her suffering and her untimely death. She was a good person. She didn't deserve to die like that. He was heartbroken. For him it was as if the world had come to an end. Nevertheless, some time after the funeral he was persuaded to go back to the museum. So, once again he found himself telling the story, but even more mechanically than before. Then one day something clicked inside him and suddenly he realised that the story was not just about those two disciples but it was about him as well. Like those two disciples he was going down a sad and lonely road. Even though he was a believer, up to this point Jesus had simply been a figure who lived in the musty pages of the Gospels. But now Jesus came alive for him. He felt his presence at his side, the presence of a friend who knew all about human suffering and at that moment his eyes were opened and he saw things differently as if he was hearing the Easter message for the first time. His heart began to burn within him – Jesus was alive! Therefore his beloved wife, who believed in Jesus, was alive too, because Jesus overcame death, not just for himself, but for us too. He went on telling the story at the museum only now he told it differently. He told it with feeling and conviction and as he did so a healing process was at work inside him and he began to hope and live again.

The story of the appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is surely one of the most wonderful stories in the Gospels – but is it too good to be true? The resurrection is the supreme truth of our Christian faith; without it there wouldn't have been any Church and our faith would be in vain. The first Christian community was founded on the resurrection and that was the main thing they preached. So what grounds do we have for believing in the resurrection. In the Gospels we have a number of resurrection stories. These begin with the empty tomb. That in itself is not proof of the resurrection - the absence of a body in the tomb could have been for any number of reasons and could be explained in many different ways. The Gospels go on to tell of a number of appearances of Jesus. These appearances are the primary way that the disciples came to know that he was risen from the dead. All these appearance stories stress that Jesus is the same person. This is why he shows his wounds to the apostles – the wound marks inflicted during the crucifixion identify him as the one who died.

Yet all the stories make it clear that he is somehow changed and therefore not immediately recognisable. This is the way of making the point that he was not the same as before, that he did not return to his earthly life just as he was before. He was somehow transformed into a different being. The raising of Jesus was not like the other stories in the Bible of people being brought back to life. For instance, Lazarus returned to his ordinary human existence, there is no suggestion that he was glorified or that he would not have to die again. Jesus, on the other hand, is portrayed as conquering death, as returning, immortal and glorified. He has risen to a new life beyond death, a life with God. Even though he was radically transformed, it was Jesus who was seen. He is still who he was but not as he was. All the stories stress the bodily resurrection of Jesus; the tomb is empty, he walks and eats with the apostles. But his risen body possesses new properties – it is no longer subject to the ordinary laws of nature or to the human boundaries of time and space.

It has been claimed that it was the naïve belief of the apostles that produced the resurrection but the Gospels show that the apostles were slow to believe in the resurrection. Even when Jesus showed himself to them, they still doubted. The faith of the apostles was brought about by the direct experience of the risen Jesus.

The most convincing argument for the resurrection is the change that came about the apostles. The crucifixion dealt them a shattering blow. Why then wasn't Jesus' death the end of the story? Because

something happened to them that they could only describe by saying that they had 'seen the Lord'. This transformed them from a cowardly group of people who were prepared to, and did, die for his message. To profess belief in the resurrection is not to affirm an absurd miracle but to affirm the power of God which is greater than the power of death.

There is a story about a Buddhist monk who asked a Catholic priest to instruct him in the truths of the faith. The priest did his best to comply with the monk's wishes. Afterwards the monk thanked him but added, "You filled my mind with beautiful thoughts but you left my heart empty." Emptiness of heart is a sorry state. Beautiful thoughts can nourish the mind but they can't nourish the heart. What did Jesus do for those two forlorn disciples on the road to Emmaus? He certainly illuminated their minds but he did something better – he set their hearts on fire. 'Were not our hearts burning within us as he explained the scriptures to us' is what they said.

Can you imagine the excitement they must have felt? Their encounter with Jesus had been emotional; it had stirred them on the inside, it had moved their very hearts, and once moved they could not help but share their experience with others. That very hour, dark as it was, late as it was, dangerous as the road was, they left for Jerusalem to share the good news. They gave witness that Jesus was risen, that he had walked with them and talked with them and broke bread at their table.

All who have experienced the risen Jesus should be moved with similar emotions. We should all want to share the good news with others - as Jesus told Thomas 'Because you have seen me – you have believed – Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.'

Let us pray...

All of us have some experience of the road to Emmaus. That road represents the road of disappointment, failure, sorrow and broken dreams. But the risen Lord journeys with us along that road just as he did with Cleopas and his companion. Lord may the splendour of your resurrection scatter the shadows of death and enable us to walk in radiant hope towards the kingdom where there are no more shattered hopes and broken dreams. **Amen.**

StF 341 – All for Jesus

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| 1) All for Jesus-all for Jesus,
This our song shall ever be:
For we have no hope, nor Saviour,
If we have not hope in thee. | 3) All for Jesus - thou hast loved us;
All for Jesus-thou hast died;
All for Jesus-thou art with us;
All for Jesus crucified. |
| 2) All for Jesus - thou wilt give us
Strength to serve thee, hour by hour;
None can move us from thy presence,
While we trust thy love and power. | 4) All for Jesus - all for Jesus -
This the church's song must be;
Till, at last, we all are gathered
One in love and one in thee. |

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Prayers of Intercession

In our prayers of intercession I want us to think of those we know who need our prayers today.

Think of someone you know – a neighbour or colleague at work, a friend - or simply someone for whom you are concerned and ask that God will break into their lives in a whole new way.....

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

Think of someone you know who is ill at home or in hospital and those who are concerned for them and ask that they will know what it means to trust in God.....

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

Think of someone who is lonely or alone, for whom each day is the same and their home has become a prison and ask that they will come to know the love of God through the love of his people.....

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

Think of someone who appears to be successful, who possess so much of the world's good things but whose life is an empty shell and ask that they will meet the risen Christ who will hold them, love them and fill them with his grace.....

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

Think of someone for whom worship has become a ritual – something they always do – they know they are just going through the motions and ask that the Holy Spirit will transform their lives.....

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

Think of a world leader or local politician – a social worker – or maybe your local doctor or teacher – who feels weighed down by their burden of their responsibilities and ask that they will experience the strength and the hope of knowing that God is with them.....

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

Think of someone whose life has been changed by their experience of war and those who have lost loved ones to the futility of war and ask that our remembering today will help to bring about the end of conflict throughout the world.....

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

Think of someone who has a burden of guilt, who feels or knows that by what they have said or done they have let others down, spoilt their own lives and the lives of others and ask that they may know the joy of sins forgiven.....

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

And lastly we pray for ourselves and our own special needs, our need for light for the journey of life and ask that in the darkness we may know the light of Christ.....

L: Lord in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer. Amen**

StF 311 – The day of resurrection

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| 1) The day of resurrection,
Earth, tell it out abroad!
The passover of gladness,
The passover of God!
From death to life eternal,
From earth unto the sky,
Our Christ has brought us over
With hymns of victory. | 3) Now let the heavens be joyful,
Let earth her song begin,
The round world keep high triumph,
And all that is therein;
Let all things seen and unseen
Their notes of gladness blend,
For Christ the Lord is risen,
Our joy that has no end. |
| 2) Our hearts be pure from evil, that we may see aright
The Lord in rays eternal of resurrection light;
And, listening to his accents, may hear, so calm and plain,
His own 'All hail!' and, hearing, may raise the victor strain. | |

St John of Damascus translated by John Mason Neale

Blessing

Lord, yours is the victory, ours is the hope. Yours is the triumph, ours is the joy. Yours is the glory, ours is the peace. Yours is the power, ours is the trust. Lord, may your risen presence hold us, guide us and lead us, now and forever. **Amen**