

A service for 14th April, 2024 (StF) Easter 3

Call to Worship: Psalm 25 verses 4 to 7

Teach me your ways, O LORD; make them known to me. Teach me to live according to your truth, for you are my God, who saves me. I always trust in you. Remember, O LORD, your kindness and constant love which you have shown from long ago. Forgive the sins and errors of my youth. In your constant love and goodness, remember me, LORD! 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.

Living God our heavenly Father, we come to offer you our praise and adoration, for you not only brought the universe to life, but raised Jesus from the grave, breaking the power of sin and death and bring into being a new covenant which draws us close enough to you that we may address you as 'Abba' or 'Daddy'.

Lord Jesus Christ, we offer you our praise and adoration, for you paid the price for our salvation by suffering death on the cross at Calvary, as the one perfect sacrifice that atones for the sins of the world. Through your death and resurrection gate to everlasting life is open to us.

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, the Holy Trinity, you have overcome the old order of sin and death through Christ Jesus. Through him all things are made new and so we come to your mercy-seat to offer you our worship and adoration today. Amen.

A prayer of confession. Let us pray.

Almighty God, we ask you to hear and accept our thanks for the many blessings we receive from you: for your undying love, despite our sinfulness and faithlessness. Forgive us when we have yielded to temptation, hopelessness and fear and 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.

Help us to change our ways as we acknowledge our selfishness, pride and lovelessness. 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.

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.

Our second hymn was written by Philipp P. Bliss, a friend of and singer for the evangelist team Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey. Whilst he was still a young man, Philipp sent a manuscript of a gospel song to a Chicago publisher, George F. Root. He attached a note bearing this message: 'If my song is worth publishing, I would appreciate having a flute in exchange for it.' Mr. Root was so impressed that not only did he send Philipp the best flute he could buy in Chicago, he also gave him a job at his firm, Root & Cady! We shall sing hymn number 361, 'Man of Sorrows! What a name'

1. Man of Sorrows! What a name

For the Son of God, who came

Ruined sinners to reclaim!

Alleluia! What a Saviour!

2. Bearing shame and scoffing rude,

In my place condemned he stood;

Sealed my pardon with his blood:

Alleluia! What a Saviour!

3. Guilty, vile, and helpless we;

Spotless Lamb of God was he:

Full atonement – can it be?

Alleluia! What a Saviour!

4. Lifted up was he to die;

'It is finished!' was his cry;

Now in heaven exalted high:

Alleluia! What a Saviour!

**5. When he comes, our glorious King,
All his ransomed home to bring,
Then anew this song we'll sing,
Alleluia! What a Saviour!**

© P.P. Bliss {1838 – 1876}

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of people near and far away. 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, self-sustaining planet on which we live as well as in your enduring grace. However, we are aware of the world's brokenness, more often than not as a result of human pride, selfishness, cruelty, greed or indifference. As followers of Jesus Christ, 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 your power, so we ask you to intervene by warming the hearts of people who possess power and influence, encouraging them 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 source of light 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 make changes so we can face the future with confidence and 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 negotiate and compromise instead of using force against opponents. Inspire them to govern with mercy and justice which are the foundations of real peace. 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. May be healed 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.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 24 verses 36b to 48

Suddenly the Lord himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

They were terrified, thinking that they were seeing a ghost. But he said to them, "Why are you alarmed? Why are these doubts coming up in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet, and see that it is I myself. Feel me, and you will know, for a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones, as you can see I have."

He said this and showed them his hands and his feet. They still could not believe, they were so full of joy and wonder; so he asked them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of cooked fish, which he took and ate in their presence. Then he said to them, "These are the very things I told you about while I was still with you: everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the writings of the prophets, and the Psalms had to come true."

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "This is what is written: The Messiah must suffer and must rise from death three days later, and in his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." Amen.

We shall sing a hymn by Revd. Samuel Medley, an Eighteenth Century Pastor at Byrom Street Baptist Church in Liverpool. It is ironic that Samuel's father was a friend of the former godless slave-trader turned priest, John Newton, for as a young man Samuel had no time for God and was a sailor, though he served in the Royal Navy until he was seriously wounded. It was whilst he was being tended back to health by his pious grandfather that Samuel found Christ. 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: "You are witnesses of these things." Luke 24:48

“I don’t believe it!” The agonised cry of Victor Meldrew from the television show, “One Foot in the Grave” might well have applied to Jesus’ disciples immediately after his resurrection. The gospels give different accounts of how the disciples refused to believe the testimony of the women who had gone to the tomb at the end of the Sabbath, so they could anoint Jesus’ body according to the Hebrew burial customs. Remember, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were given permission by Pontius Pilate to take Jesus from the cross and place him into the tomb just before the first two stars appeared in the sky to mark the beginning of Sabbath. They had no time to perform the burial rituals, or to anoint his body with spices and myrrh, so the women ventured from the barred room to perform their final act of love for Christ. In Mark’s gospel, the women said nothing because they were too afraid which I suggest is an excuse for the eleven’s unbelief: **‘no one told us!’** In Matthew, the women were directed to tell the eleven to go to meet Jesus in Galilee and he noted obliquely, ‘some doubted’. John’s gospel has the deeply moving account of Mary Magdalene as the first person to encounter Jesus on his resurrection, but she had clearly not been believed, probably because her past record of spiritual or mental ill-health would have made her claims seem fanciful – possibly even to a modern jury.

Our passage from Luke follows directly from the testimony of Cleopas and his companion that they had met and talked with the risen Lord when they shared a meal with him back in Emmaus. Now, you could argue that such a claim from people who were outside the twelve could be doubted at best or disregarded on the grounds that Jesus would have little reason to choose them as witnesses above his inner circle of followers, yet Cleopas may well have been Clopas, husband of Mary, who was one of the women at the foot of the cross and supported Jesus’ ministry. Moreover, from early that morning others had declared they had found the tomb empty, except for folded grave-clothes which suggested that the body had not been stolen away by Caiaphas, or grave-robbers.

You may think that the eleven would surely have believed the women who had resolutely supported them throughout Jesus’s ministry, that they would have trusted and respected them. However, the women might not have been believed because women were regarded as second-class citizens in Jewish society, so the eleven might have reasoned that an angel would not have told the women before he informed the much more important males disciples (as the eleven would have deemed themselves). Don’t forget that in a First Century Jewish court a woman’s evidence was not accepted unless corroborated by a male, nor that none of the eleven had been with the womenfolk when they found the empty tomb!

However, Luke wrote that when Cleopas told the eleven that Jesus had been raised from the dead, they told him that Christ had appeared to Simon Peter. Surely, therefore, there should have been no more doubts – but there were. Perhaps the news was simply too good for them to accept. Perhaps they were clinging on to the idea that once you are dead, that is the bitter end – at least until the Day of Judgement. They may have been overwhelmed by the speed of the past week’s events: the cries of “Hosanna!” when Jesus entered Jerusalem that changed within days to, “Crucify him!”; Jesus’ terrible death and a Sabbath when everything must have seemed in ruins – no revolt that many had expected Christ to lead against the Romans; no salvation and no hope for the future. Then suddenly, news that they could not have dreamed about – Christ is risen!

It is unsurprising that they were terrified when Jesus appeared with them in that locked room. They probably thought he was a ghost, even when he greeted them with,

“Shalom!” invited them to examine him to feel that he was flesh and blood and showed them his wounds. In their circumstances would any of us have been better without the hindsight of history? Their fearful doubts lasted until Jesus ate some fish to demonstrate that he was neither a ghost, nor a figment of their imagination, but a physical being!

You might have expected Jesus to have thrown up his hands in despair at his hopeless, faithless, doubting followers; to have turned elsewhere for others to spread the Good News. Instead, he did two amazing things: he patiently taught them how his death and resurrection fulfilled the Scriptures and had overcome the powers of sin and death once and for all. Next, he declared that **in his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.** Even though they had proved to be inadequate in nearly every respect, the disciples were entrusted with the task of taking the gospel message to a hostile, skeptical world, for as he told them, **“You are witnesses of these things.”** The question posed by Luke was what could transform such a group of confused, fearful failures into anything like a dynamic force? Try to hold on to this image of the disciples at the resurrection, for it will make the events of Pentecost in a few weeks’ time all the more remarkable.

It is evident that Luke was teaching his audience and us that if we try to rely on our own resources, we will probably fail, because our faith and powers aren’t strong enough. We have our doubts and fears to hold us back even when we want to answer the Great Commission. Like it or not, we will fare no better than the followers did before Pentecost. However, if we serve in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can exceed our expectations, just like the disciples did after the indwelling of the Spirit. Also, God calls so – called ordinary people – just like us – to spread the Good News, not just the Establishment, charismatic academics and theologians. Consider the backgrounds of the disciples. They were ordinary people, like us, but people who were transformed by God’s power living within them. Remember, too, Mary Magdalen and the other female followers were the first to believe Jesus had risen, so the women here have a great tradition to uphold! Christ will live in us through the same Spirit, who encourages each of us to play our part by revealing God’s truth and letting his love shine through our lives in the way we treat other people day by day. May our faith in the risen Christ inspire and guide our discipleship to his everlasting glory. Amen.

We shall conclude our worship with a clarion call to speak up for the gospel by Canon Edward Burns. It was written in 1968 for an evangelising challenge in the diocese of Blackburn. May we, too, share good news for all in our words and actions. We shall sing hymn number 418, ‘We have a gospel to proclaim,’

- 1. We have a gospel to proclaim,
Good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour’s name:
We sing his story, tell his worth.**
- 2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem –
Not in a royal house or hall,
But in a stable, dark and dim,
The Word made flesh, a light for all.**
- 3. Tell of his death at Calvary:
Hated by those he came to save,
In lonely suffering on the cross,**

For all he loved his life he gave.

**4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn;
Empty the tomb, for he was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share his victory.**

**5. Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
By all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his church
To live for him, the Lamb who died.**

**6. Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.**

© *Edward J. Burns (1938 –)*

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.