

A service for 18th April, 2021 – (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.

We shall sing a hymn which appears in “Hymns and Psalms”, but, incomprehensibly, is omitted from “Singing the Faith”. (I try not to despair). It was written around 1815 by Thomas Kelly, a priest in the Church of Ireland, who was banned from preaching by the Archbishop of Dublin because of the evangelical emphasis of his message. I wish I could be convicted of such a charge! As a result, Revd. Kelly preached as an independent minister and was an active worker among the poor. It is number 182 in “Hymns and Psalms”, but I am setting the words for you below.

**1. We sing the praise of him who died,
Of him who died upon the cross;
The sinner’s hope let men deride;
For this we count the world but loss.**

**2. Inscribed upon the cross we see,
In shining letters, ‘God is love’;
He bears our sins upon the tree;
He brings us mercy from above.**

**3. The cross – it takes our guilt away;
It holds the fainting spirit up;
It cheers with hope the gloomy day,
And sweetens every bitter cup;**

**4. It makes the coward spirit brave,
And nerves the feeble arm for fight;
It takes all terror from the grave,
And gilds the bed of death with light;**

**5. The balm of life, the cure of woe,
The measure and the pledge of love,
The sinner’s refuge here below,
The angels’ theme in heaven above.**

© Thomas Kelly (1769 – 1855)

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 Satan’s hold on us and reconciling sinners like us to you, breaking the power of death and offering us eternal life.

Lord Jesus Christ, we offer you our praise and adoration, for you brought our salvation by suffering death on the cross at Calvary, atoning for the sins of the world and opening 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, the Holy Trinity, you have overcome the old order of sin and death through the life, death and resurrection of 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 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 ourselves and others. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy,' please respond with 'Hear our prayer'. Let us pray.

Remember, in your love, O Lord, the Church both locally and throughout the world. Unite us in spirit, truth and love, so we may know your power and bear the light of Good News to this sad and sin-darkened world. Bring us through this pandemic and renew our calling. May our words and actions be a sign that Jesus is risen.

'Lord, in your mercy,' **'Hear our prayer'.**

Remember in your love this beautiful, but broken world which you created and declared good: We reflect upon our environment, pollution and diminishing resources and ask you to inspire and guide people who are striving to keeping earth habitable; we pray for people who seek a fair and proper use of the world's resources, including coronavirus vaccines; those who strive for justice and wellbeing, thinking especially of members of the NHS, scientists, carers and key-workers at present, as they try to bring us through this time of trial and anguish. Grant them success in their endeavours.

'Lord, in your mercy,' **'Hear our prayer'.**

Remember O Lord, those of us whose hearts are broken because of the COVID19 pandemic, those who have endured loneliness, those who are suffering from long-COVID and everybody who is afraid and can see no way forward. In the name of the risen Lord Jesus, enfold us with your love, comfort and strengthen us. Renew our flagging spirits and bring us through this spiritual darkness into the light of your salvation.

'Lord, in your mercy,' **'Hear our prayer'.**

Remember, too, people who suffer: the victims of prejudice, oppression, injustice, terrorism and conflict. We recall how Jesus Christ suffered persecution, injustice, torture and execution for our sake. Teach us and our leaders to act justly and to care for our neighbours. May the whole earth be transformed by mercy and rejoice in hope.

'Lord, in your mercy,' **'Hear our prayer'.**

Remember people whose memories and faculties are diminishing because of a dementia, their families, friends and carers; have compassion on people who are sick in body, mind or spirit; those who are in need or any kind of trouble; neighbours who live with depression or whose relationships have broken down and everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear. Lord, in a time of reflection we bring you names of people for whom we are especially concerned

'Lord, in your mercy,' **'Hear our prayer'.**

Sovereign God, we ask you to remember Her Majesty the Queen and the Royal Family as they mourn the death of Prince Philip. We thank you for his life of service and for his attempts to change society, especially his concern for the environment and for the development of young people. Grant him eternal life and his family and friends comfort and grace in their loss.

'Lord, in your mercy,' **'Hear our prayer'.**

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.

“Christ is alive! No longer bound / To distant years in Palestine, / But saving, healing, here and now, / And touching every place and time.” Lovely words by **Brian Wren** to remind us that Jesus is for today and tomorrow, as well as yesterday. 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)*

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, though as a young man he had no time for God and 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 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, I suggest a get-out for the eleven’s unbelief. In Matthew, the women were directed to tell the eleven to go to meet Jesus in Galilea and he noted ‘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. However, 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 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. He will live in us through the same Spirit, who encourages each of us to play our part by revealing God's truth and letting Christ's 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 evangelize by Canon Edward Burns. It was written in 1968 for an evangelising challenge in the diocese of Blackburn. Perhaps the Nineteenth Century Archbishop of Dublin would have disapproved, but I certainly don't. 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.**

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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.