

A service intended for Lawrence Lane at Passiontide (StF)

10.45 a.m. 29th March, 2020.

Call to Worship: Psalm 111 verses 1 to 3 (New Century)

Praise the LORD! I will thank the LORD with all my heart in the meeting of his good people. The LORD does great things; those who enjoy them seek them. What he does is glorious and splendid, and his goodness continues forever. Amen.

Let us pray.

Almighty, heavenly Father, the works of your hands proclaim your wisdom, holiness, power and glory, for you fashioned the vast galaxies of stars throughout the Universe and gave us stewardship of this lovely, self-sustaining world with its remarkable varieties of plant and animal life. More than that, you have tried to establish a covenant of love and faith with human beings from the beginning of our history, yet when we rebelled against you and made ourselves your enemies, you took on our humanity as Christ Jesus, not only experiencing our lives, but dying for our sins.

As we hear again the passion of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, we are amazed by the love you have for fallen humanity, for you not only shared our mortal frame as Jesus, but became the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. By his death at Calvary, Jesus broke the power of Satan and, when he was raised on the third day, he triumphed over death, so that through his grace we have the gift of eternal life and death no longer has the final word. Glorious heavenly Father, our words are inadequate to describe your greatness, so we pray that you will accept the best we can offer in our worship and in our lives, for we want to be your holy people, a light to all who do not know and love Christ Jesus.

Loving Lord, thank you for all the blessings we have received from you throughout our lives: the good things we enjoy; experiences and opportunities that have enriched us and people who have loved us, guided us and brought light and joy to us.

Merciful Lord, we ask your forgiveness for our failure to live as you would have us live: for our foolishness, hard-heartedness, unwillingness to forgive and our lack of faith. Lord, pardon us for the sins we have committed and the good we have neglected to do, as we repent of our wrongdoing in Jesus' lovely name.

Most gracious God, we believe that you answer our prayers, and offer us a fresh beginning. Therefore, help us to model our lives, our responses and our deeds on the perfect example of your dear Son, Christ Jesus, so he may shine

through all we do and say, thus guiding neighbours to know, love and follow him. Amen.

We shall now bring our prayers of intercession to the Lord.

Almighty God, your Son Christ Jesus promised that you will hear us when we ask in faith, so we ask you to receive the prayer we now offer. We know you have given us a beautiful, self-sustaining planet upon which to live, yet we are aware of its brokenness, both through natural disasters and, more often because of human, pride, foolishness and greed.

Help us learn to co-operate with one another by standing up against prejudice in any of its guises, to encourage one another to care for our earth's ecosystem, so future generations will inherit a healthy planet on which to prosper. Grant us courage to stand up for justice for all peoples, not just those with whom we feel comfortable, or whose values we share and help us to do what we can to support poor people here and abroad.

Lord we pray for healing in our warring world. Heal the fractured relationships that lead to conflicts. Heal the pride and selfishness of leaders who refuse to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise..... Heal the victims of warfare, persecution and terrorism, especially in Idlib Province in Syria..... Heal us, too, when our relationships with family, friends and neighbours break down.

We offer our prayer for healing to the victims of natural disasters especially populations inundated by recent flooding in the United Kingdom, besides those in Australia who are recovering from devastating wildfires.

We remember victims of the coronavirus COVID 19 and pray for their deliverance. Help them and us remember that you are with us in this time of trial, so we all may face an uncertain, even threatening future, with grounded hope. We remember with gratitude all doctors, nurses, ancillary staff, care workers and kind-hearted volunteers in the United Kingdom who are putting themselves in harm's way as they seek to help Coronavirus patients and vulnerable members of society.

Loving Lord, hear our prayer for the NHS. May it receive the support it needs to heal its weaknesses and to grow to meet the changing needs of our society, especially with the challenge of COVID 19. We offer our thanks especially for the healing rendered at our local hospitals, Russells Hall and The Corbett, for our GPs and health workers in the community. Help them to cope with the pressures they are facing and may they find blessing and safety in their work.

Loving Lord, inspire and guide governments, scientists, researchers and authorities as they seek to deal with the effects of COVID 19 and to protect their populations by their policies. Hear our prayer for countries that lack welfare systems to combat this virus, that international support will soon be forthcoming and let your blessing rest upon medical staff and scientists who are seeking to bring healing around the world.

Jesus came to heal and comfort the marginalised and sick whom he met, so we pray for the healing of everybody we know who is sick in body, mind or spirit, or recovering from injuries or operations. Grant them wellbeing, hope and peace not only through the professional care and support they are given, but by feeling your presence during their time of need. Remember, O Lord, people who are living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers who struggle to manage day by day. Reassure them in their confusion, comfort them in their distress and let them feel loved and valued amidst the problems they are facing.

We offer our prayer for people who have been bereaved, or those who are lonely, undervalued, homeless and unemployed. In a time of silence we offer the names of people for whom we are particularly concerned Help us to be sensitive to the needs of people around us, so we can befriend and support them. Loving Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so it may bring them healing, comfort, hope and peace.

Holy God, we pray not only for this Church and churches in our Circuit, but also for the World Church. As we journey through Lent to Calvary and the empty tomb, may your Holy Spirit heal and unite us in love and outreach, so we become beacons of hope to our sin-darkened, and often selfish world.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our friends and families. Keep us free from harm and grant us strength to resist temptation to sin. May the Holy Spirit help us share the love you give us in such abundance with all-comers, so we honour you in the sacred name of Christ our Saviour. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 11 verses 1 to 45

“See from his head, his hands, his feet, / Sorrow and love flow mingled down; / Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, / Or thorns compose so rich a crown?’ We shall sing a hymn written by Isaac Watts 313 years ago, yet one that I don’t think has been equalled. Hymn number 287, ‘When I survey the wondrous cross,’

Sermon: “I am the resurrection and the life.” John 11:25 – Thomas’ Testimony

Shalom chaverim! May you and your families receive the fulness of the Lord's blessings today and always! Let me introduce myself. I am Thomas, a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. I am also known as Thomas Didymus, the twin, but I suppose I'm best - known by my nickname, 'Doubting Thomas', thanks to my friend, John! You ask why am I here? Well, let me tell you. The preacher wants me to explain the significance of our Master raising our friend Lazarus four days after he'd been put in his tomb.

While we were by the River Jordan, several miles east of Jericho, we received news that Lazarus – Martha & Mary's brother – was gravely ill at Bethany. It was a difficult time as the Master had only just escaped being stoned by his opponents at Jerusalem, so we disciples weren't keen to return within seven miles of the Holy City, so soon after the incident. Therefore, we were relieved when Jesus decided to spend two more days by the Jordan, though I, personally, was surprised that he did nothing to help his friends from Bethany who had supported and regularly offered hospitality to us whenever we visited Jerusalem.

Three days after we had heard the news about Lazarus, Jesus said we were going to return to Judea. At once I knew he would be going to Bethany, but it was too dangerous, so several of us, including Peter, tried to dissuade him. However, Jesus wouldn't be put off, saying that it wasn't time for him to come to harm. He also told us that Lazarus was already dead, adding that he was glad he'd not been there, so we might believe. When the other disciples hesitated, I realised that the Master would not be put off, so I took the lead, saying, "Let us all go with the Teacher, so that we may die with him." –

It sounds grand now, especially as when the Lord was betrayed by that zealot Judas Iscariot, we all ran away, but when I spoke up I really meant that we should share his dangers, rather than literally die – *simply because I couldn't accept that the Messiah could die*. I was convinced he was testing us, seeing how firm we were in faith. After all, was he not to be a warrior like the figure from Isaiah 63 whose clothes were stained with our enemies' blood? Wasn't he going to destroy our Roman masters, restore Judah to the prosperity and power that had been enjoyed during King David's lifetime? Once he had done that, the Messiah would be able to compel God's people to observe every detail and ordinance of the Torah, wouldn't he?

We made way to Bethany, but even before we reached Lazarus' house, Martha approached the Master and said with some feeling that, if he'd been present earlier, then her brother wouldn't have died. Jesus replied, "Your brother

will rise to life.” Martha was unsatisfied, thinking he meant Lazarus would rise at the end of time, but instead the Lord added, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die.” Martha looked startled, but before she could reply, her sister, Mary, greeted Jesus with the same words as Martha, but with many tears, too. The Master was visibly moved by their distress, so he asked where the body lay. We then understood why the Master had told us he was glad he hadn’t been present at his friend’s death. The sisters and mourners led us to the tomb cut out of sandstone and sealed with a large stone. When he reached Lazarus’ tomb our Master surprised us all by weeping. He’d not wept when he raised Jairus’ daughter, nor the young man at Nain, but he did at Bethany.

I now realise that the Rabbi had much to weep over: our – the disciples’ and the sisters’ incomprehension; the crowds’ scepticism; the loss of his dear friend and – no doubt – the imminence of his own death. However, Jesus did not just weep tears of grief. He was angry about the power death held over all of us, about those unyielding fetters of sin that bound us to death. Nevertheless, I thought it was pointless when the Lord prayed aloud. After all, Lazarus had been entombed for four days and in our climate his body would already have been in an advanced state of decay. Jairus’ daughter and the widow’s son had been newly-dead, so they could have been given new life before their bodies began to decompose. You might say they could have been resuscitated, but how can a festering corpse be restored? Yet Lazarus was such a corpse!

In a loud voice my Master commanded our friend to come out from his tomb and he did – still wrapped in his tallit, or funeral shawl, with his face covered with a cloth. The Master showed no surprise, unlike everybody else. As we stood, disbelieving the evidence of our eyes, he told those nearest to remove the face cloth and long tallit, so he was not encumbered by them. Mary and Martha ran to embrace their brother, sobbing with joy and praising the Lord. We, too, were amazed, for Jesus had just proved beyond doubt that he’d power even over death itself. He had proved beyond doubt that he is the Messiah, both human and divine, for only the Almighty has power over death!

Of course, not everyone was so pleased. Some Pharisees, who were scrutinising everything our Master did, reported the event to the cynical High Priest, Caiaphas. Their account convinced the High Priest that our Master would lead an uprising at Pessach – that’s Passover to you – and, fearing savage reprisals from Rome, Caiaphas determined that our Lord must die to prevent an uprising. Isn’t it ironic that by raising the dead to life, the Master’s own death was sealed!

A week later, as we entered Jerusalem, we were met by crowds so enthusiastic that I suppose Jesus could have led a successful uprising, well-supported by the mob. I say mob, because within a week many of those who shouted, 'Hosanna!' were crying 'Crucify him!' However, that kind of revolution wasn't his way, for Jesus entered the Holy City on a young donkey, like a peacemaker, not a warrior. None of us guessed that in a few more days he was going to be betrayed, tried, crucified and then raised by his Father on the third day – but you will be hearing more of this later.

What does this story mean to us? It means that Jesus has power over all things, power over death, our last enemy. We now know that by his death and resurrection the Master has taken the burden of our sins from us and he offers each of us everlasting life. We have nothing to fear in this life or the next because of his self-sacrifice, nothing, even death, can separate us from God's love.

More than that, our Master teaches that his Father, the Lord Almighty listens to and answers our prayers, albeit in his own time and not always as we expect. If we trust him, he can breathe new life and hope into situations that we may think beyond remedy, for the God who gave His Only Son for us will never desert us. Shabbat Shalom my friends! Amen.

'Christ the Lord came from the Father'.

**1. Christ the Lord came from the Father,
Came to heal our wounded race:
Brought Good News in words and actions;
Showed the Father's loving face.
Jesus came to die for sinners
On a cross at Calvary –
Flawless Lamb of God who loves us,
Sacrificed to set us free.**

**2. Christ the Lord came for the poor,
Calling us to share our bread:
Taught and healed the sick and outcast,
Cured the lepers, raised the dead.
Jesus showed that God is with us,
That his kingdom's all around.
When we serve him in obedience,**

Then the grace of God is found.

3. Christ the Lord was raised to free us
Off'ring all eternal life,
Heals the sting of death forever,
Brings us safe through times of strife.
Jesus, when he left for heaven
Sent the holy Paraclete:
Filled believers with his power,
Warmed their hearts, made faith complete.

4. Glory to our heavenly Father,
Honour to the loving Son;
Pow'r unto the living Spirit,
Bound in love since time begun.
Praise we offer, faithful Saviour,
Grant us faith to serve your call:
Day by day may our behaviour
Offer grace and peace to all.

*M. Rider 28th April, 2018 – written at the Endeavour Rally at Knowle Methodist.
(To StF410, "Abbott's Leigh" or "What a friend" StF531)*