



Service for Private or Personal Use Sunday 19th April

Prayer

Jesus came and stood among them, and said to them, “Peace be with you – Shalom!”

As our lives are turned upside down, speak peace to us.

As our country struggles to cope, speak peace to us.

As we face the frustration of limited contact with loved ones, speak peace to us.

As we see pictures of stressed health-workers, speak peace.

As government attempts to control a crisis, speak peace.

As patients face suffering and death, away from their families, speak peace.

As the bereaved are denied the opportunity of a normal funeral, speak peace.

Lord of life and conqueror of death, stand with us and bring us peace.

Amen.

A week has passed. An Easter like no other that we can remember was last week, and so much has happened since then. As we still try to adjust to a world that has changed so dramatically, and to patterns of life that create problems and tensions, as well as opportunities, may we hold on to the greatest change in the history of the world, found in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we hold on to that, may we find that it is we who are held in that great love.

By God’s great mercy we have been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (see 1st Peter chapter 1 verse 3)

Hymn Perhaps *Crown him with many crowns* (H&P 255, StF 347) or *He is Lord* (H&P 256 StF 348) or a favourite Easter hymn of praise

Read Psalm 16, in which we might first be attracted to the celebration of the fellowship of believers (which we are missing so much) – “the saints... are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.” This finds an echo in the first letter of John, when he writes that “we know we have passed from death into life, because we love our fellow-Christians.” (1st John chapter 3 verse 14)

For some people more than others (though for all of us to some extent) we can say like this Psalm “the lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.” They may not be pleasant at present; circumstances may be very difficult, but we remember times of blessing and hold on in faith and hope. We “shall not be shaken.”

On the Day of Pentecost, in Acts chapter 2 verses 25 to 31, Peter quotes this Psalm, to say that it was true of Jesus: his soul was not abandoned, he did not see corruption. It makes this a very suitable Psalm for the Easter season.

The final verse of the Psalm is a gem to be treasured. In Christ God has set the path of life before us, and invites us to journey along it in his company. There is joy as we travel, and a sure destination.

Prayer

When I open my eyes, Lord, in the world around me I begin to notice how you have written ‘Resurrection’ into every Spring day. I see signs of returning life:

blossom on the trees, leaves bursting from the prison of a bud, bright coloured flowers. I hear the birds supplying the melody to accompany our Hallelujahs. And it was on a Spring morning in Jerusalem that our Saviour returned to life. Let these signs stir my heart to pause and worship, to pray and to renew my faith.

And when my eye rests on a gaunt tree, may I remember that it was on a tree that the Lord Jesus was impaled, so that he might win our salvation; by death destroying death and opening the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers.

When my spirits are low and cold, awaiting the rising sun, may they be warmed by the Son of God who is risen already, and his light dispel my shadows.

Hymn such as H&P 760 *Jesus, we look to thee* or H&P 763 *See, Jesus, thy disciples*, see express the right thought. If you are using StF perhaps 309 *See, what a morning*

Reading John chapter 20 verses 19 to 31

Terribly unfair! Why them, but not me? Faith would be so very much easier if only I could see him for myself; if only I could touch him, and hear him like they did.

Is that so, Thomas? Was it really as straightforward as that? Were you jealous of their privilege? Or did you blame yourself for not having been with them when Jesus came? Why were the saints not *your* delight, in the way that Psalm described them?

Well, Thomas, in the end you got what you wanted. You did see him, did hear his voice and were given the chance to feel those wounds. What about us? Don't you think that we, twenty centuries later, would love to see him too, in all his risen glory? When we have to listen to loud voices of unbelief and wrestle with the questions of suffering; when evil people prosper and good people get a raw deal; when disease and death strike indiscriminately and cut short good lives – don't you think that our faith might benefit from seeing him, alive still? We also would like a totally convincing proof.

Let's pause for breath. How might Thomas answer us as travel with him through these verses?

As Jesus was being crucified, the disciples all forsook him and fled. It wasn't wise to be closely identified with a man being executed as a rebel against Rome, and an enemy of the Jewish authorities. The smart move was to lie low. We don't know where Thomas went, and whether he kept any contact with the other ten over that weekend – probably he rested on the Sabbath, as well as keeping out of harm's way. Quite possibly he had not heard any news by that first Sunday evening, and saw no reason to be there. None of them expected Jesus to rise after a death like that.

Did he meet up with them during the week, or did they search for him, eager to tell him what they knew? We don't know, but it is easy to sympathise with his envy of their experience. Mary, Peter, Cleopas and his companion (we will hear about them next week!), and then the ten together – but not Thomas. Lord, why do some people enjoy these stupendous blessings, and I must depend on second-hand reports?

All week he must have been griping about how unfair it all was – as if Jesus was at his beck-and-call to turn up just like that. The others had not arranged for Jesus to appear, so why should he? Like Thomas, they had refused to believe what they were told, or give credit to what Jesus had told them beforehand, or even trust the word of

the angels. Were they playing a cruel practical joke on poor gullible Thomas? Was their imagination, or wishful thinking, playing tricks on them, while sensible Thomas would not be taken in?

How much time Thomas spent with them that week we are not told; but when the next Sunday evening came he was there – and so was Jesus. (“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”) The doors were securely locked, so his coming was not by ordinary means. As before, his first word was “Peace.” This was no empty formality, because the sheer unexpectedness of it was disturbing. Their hearts needed that perfect peace – the peace that he had promised to them the night when he was delivered up (see John 14 verse 27). He had told them not to let their hearts be troubled or afraid. His resurrection was the guarantee.

His next words were addressed directly to Thomas. “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and stretch out your hand, and place it in my side.” He uses the exact words that Thomas had used while refusing to believe what others told him. Jesus may have been out of view, but he was not absent; nor is he now.

The next words don’t translate well; they become clumsy in English if we try to catch the play-on-words that is in the Greek. We could translate it as, “Stop being an unbeliever and be a believer,” or, “Don’t be faith-less, but instead be faith-ful.” I hope you get the drift; Thomas did!

In that moment he realised that Jesus knew and understood his heart as well as his words. Every minister can tell you how people in grief say angry things against God; and we tell them that God has broad enough shoulders and a big enough heart to take it.

When learning to swim we generally stay in the shallow end, where feet can safely reach the bottom. But at some point we have to venture out into the insecurity of the deeper water. It will support us just as certainly as the shallows, but now we have nothing else to rely on. So it was that Jesus gently, but firmly, told Thomas that he must push out into the deep, where his faith can no longer rely on what he sees or touches.

Then Jesus widened the scope. Down through the ages people like you and me would have to venture into faith on the basis of the testimony of others. Just as we can only prove the water will support us by ceasing to cling to the side, and lifting our feet off the bottom, so our faith is confirmed as we let Jesus into our lives. We discover that he can change us; he can overcome sin; he can give us the motivation to serve; he can give us an appetite for Christian fellowship, for worship, for prayer and for our Bible. There is indeed a blessing for those who have not seen, but yet have believed. Isn’t that what Thomas would tell us?

And that faith is not *blind* faith, belief without evidence (as the new Atheists fondly imagine). The many signs that Jesus performed all point us to that great confession. Travel where those signs point, to the Son of God who rose from the dead, and is alive with us now. Peter wrote (in the reading we haven’t used) “Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with a joy that is inexpressible.” (1st Peter chapter 1 verse 8) Like Thomas, we don’t reply, “I am convinced.” That is not enough. Instead we say to Jesus, “My Lord and my God.”

Prayer

Lord, I come to you with my hang-ups, with my questions, and – yes – my doubts. I envy those with a simple faith and a cast-iron certainty; but I'm not made like that. Your gentle grace towards Thomas gives me hope that there is room for me. Grant me the courage to venture a little further, a little deeper. I dare not ask the courage to do great things, but to play my part faithfully and lovingly.

I pray for those people working under enormous stress at present, keeping the Health Service functioning, maintaining the emergency services, getting food and other essential supplies where they are needed. I pray for the testers in the laboratories, and the researchers trying to find cures and vaccinations.

I pray for those not able to go to work; some have health problems; some have no work to go to; some find their normal work has dried up; some have jobs that have little use in the present circumstances. May they know that their worth is not measured by what they do, but the people they are.

I pray for those who are finding life difficult; for those who are ill, whether with the virus or other causes and for those who care for them; for those who are anxious or depressed, and cannot get help; for those who long for company but are isolated; for those whose hearts ache in bereavement.

I pray for the people I love to worship with, who I missed at Easter. May they be filled with joy, as well as faith and love. Hasten the day when we can meet together again, not just with each other, but with the risen Jesus in our midst. We ask these and all our prayers in his name, Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

The Collect for the Sunday after Easter

Faithful God, the strength of all who believe
and the hope of those who doubt;
may we, who have not seen, have faith
and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing;
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Hymn A hymn of faith, such as *Jesus lives! Thy terrors now...* (H&P 198) or *In Christ alone* (StF 351) or choose another favourite that expresses your trust in Christ.

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

Bible readings for next week:

Luke 24 verses 13 to 35
Acts 2 verse 14a and 36 to 41
Psalm 116 verses 1 to 4 and 12 to 19
1st Peter chapter 1 verses 17 to 23