

Teddington Circuit Worship at Home

Sunday 19th April 2020

This short act of worship has been prepared for worship at home. If you are well enough why not spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you. Many thanks to the Connexional Team, David Innes and Nick White for their contributions.

Opening Prayer

In places of darkness and in the fullness of light
Christ is risen
In times of doubt and in strength of faith
Christ is risen
In our pain and in our joy
Christ is risen
The Lord is risen
He is risen indeed! Hallelujah

Hymn: This joyful Eastertide (StF 314)

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tipsbcfuB4>

**This joyful Eastertide,
what need is there for grieving?
Cast all your cares aside
and be not unbelieving:
Come, share our Easter joy
that death could not imprison,
nor any power destroy,
our Christ, who is arisen!**

**No work for him is vain,
no faith in him mistaken,
for Easter makes it plain
his kingdom is not shaken:**

**Then put your trust in Christ,
in waking and in sleeping.
His grace on earth sufficed;
he'll never quit his keeping:**

Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000)

Opening Prayer

We come to meet with Jesus. Although we may be on our own or with family, we join also with friends from church who are meeting at this same time. We meet with Jesus as his disciples did the week following the first Easter. We hear the words that he spoke to them. Let's take some time in quiet so that we can hear him speaking to us through those words.

Jesus says. "Peace be with you". Whatever worries or fears that we have, let's let Jesus' peace sink deep within us and feel the calmness of his presence.

Silence

Jesus says to Thomas, "Stop doubting and believe". Though we live with questions and uncertainties, may we learn to trust our lives to Jesus. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed".

Silence

"If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven". We take time to think of those hurts that we still carry. Let's release them to God. As we forgive others, we remember that God forgives us.

Silence

Jesus says to his disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit". Let's let his restoring power flow into our lives.

Silence

And Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Let's offer the week ahead to Jesus. We may be very limited in what we can do at the moment, but let's offer to be his voice of encouragement and hope to others whenever we can.

We offer these prayers in Jesus' name. Amen.

Today's Reading from the letters: 1 Peter 1:3

Time to Reflect

Last Sunday we celebrated the historical event which is the foundation of our faith. The resurrection of Jesus Christ. His rising from death after His crucifixion. But can you remember the first time you heard about the Crucifixion and the Resurrection?

Perhaps it was at Junior Church, or from a believing parent, or a friend, or a youth leader. Perhaps you read about it in the Bible first. But when you first heard what had happened, did you believe it was true? Or did you think – that can't be possible?

I suspect that for many of us, if not all of us, there was at least an element of doubt. Rose from the dead? You mean bodily? Really? How do you know? Where's the proof? Sometimes, things just seem to be too good to be true, so good that we can't believe it. We might call it healthy skepticism, natural caution or simply pessimistic doubt. Nevertheless, the saying goes, "Seeing is believing" - seeing it with our own eyes.

Perhaps you have missed seeing something unexpected happening at an event. You may be driven to exclaim, like Victor Meldrew, "I don't believe it!" And so to dispel your doubts you try to find someone who was there. But then you wonder if you can trust them - perhaps they are making it up. But eventually, as the facts are corroborated, you accept it - yes, it did happen.

But of course, you don't have to see some things to believe they exist. Things like electricity, your bank balance, viruses, the wind. Because we see the effect. We believe in aerodynamic lift when an aeroplane flies through the sky. The main challenge of Easter is to decide if the account of the resurrection is true.

Christians are described as "believers", because we believe it is true. Many non-believers in the resurrection, still believe a Christian lifestyle is a good idea. But it fatally undermines their confidence in life after death and redemption.

Today's Gospel Reading: John 20: 19-31

Time to Reflect

Poor old Thomas missed an event where something unexpected happened. And so he said, "I don't believe it", simply because he hadn't seen it. Even when his friends and fellow disciples told him it was true, he still doubted. We can sympathise with him, because we often have doubts about things we haven't seen.

It is also likely that when we first heard of the events of Easter, we may have had doubts. Doubts about the truth of the resurrection, about Jesus rising bodily from the grave. Perhaps we still harbour some doubts in our hearts and minds at times even now. This is nothing to feel guilty about. It is worth reassuring ourselves from time to time. For when we do, our belief grows, as we eliminate all other alternative explanations.

In the days following Christ's crucifixion, Thomas went through three stages of faith.

Stage 1: The Maybe Christian

The first stage is Thomas between Good Friday and Easter Sunday - the "Maybe" stage. Many people in a nominally Christian country like Britain are "maybe" Christians. They may put "C of E" down as their religion on a form, or "Catholic", even if not Christian. If they are asked to say whether He rose again bodily, they might even say, "Maybe". And that's how Thomas would have reacted in that first weekend after Christ's death.

But when the disciples gathered in the Upper Room that Sunday, Thomas was missing. He was like many believers today who say they don't need to attend church to be a Christian. They don't need regular scripture reading, or meeting in groups, to develop their faith. "I'm just fine as I am", they say, "I don't need my spiritual batteries charged, thank you". People can and do maintain a living Christian faith without meeting together for worship. Some can't attend because of work, or imprisonment, or illness, or being housebound. Some are persecuted in a foreign land where collective Christian worship is banned.

But for those who can, a regular spiritual health check is vital, like going to the dentist.

For one thing, we need to confess our sins and get right with God, like a spiritual cavity filling! Regular fellowship with Jesus and those who believe in Him sustains our faith.

It helps make our relationship with Him more alive and more second nature.

When one meets someone only rarely, even talking to them can be quite difficult,

That's why daily prayer and scripture reading help bridge the gap between Sundays.

Maybe we can tell God how we're doing resisting the temptations we've confessed before.

The "Maybe" Christian misses out on so much in a personal relationship with Jesus.

Stage 2: The "Probably" Christian (the "Almost Christian")

In the week that followed Thomas became a "Probably" Christian. He became a seeker. Yes, he'd missed Christ's appearance to His other disciples in the Upper Room. But his friends kept reassuring him, "Jesus is alive, He is risen from the dead".

Many people today are in that "probably" state. They worship regularly (most weeks). They're close to people who've met Christ personally. But they're still filled with doubt. Could it really be true, they wonder? "I've never actually seen a miracle", they

might say. Perhaps they've concluded that there is insufficient evidence to prove the resurrection. Like juries in Scotland, when the general consensus is that the accused is probably guilty, but the hard evidence is considered insufficient, they return a verdict of "Not proven". The "Probably" Christian worships Jesus as a great man, a hero, a prophet, a role model. But not as a personal Saviour and friend, because they lack proof beyond any doubts. They pray earnestly, just in case it works, but lack the confidence to share their faith. This state is nothing to be ashamed of – we have all been in that state – I know I have.

Have you ever attended a club or society or regular activity, but not "joined"? I've done this. After a while you are granted some sort of "special visitor" status, which gives you a degree of acceptance, and some sense of belonging. The Methodist church has a word for it – "adherents" – people on the community roll. But you are like a standby passenger in the airport with no guarantee of a seat. One will probably be available for you, so you wait in hope. You may be all right. People miss out on so much of the Christian life if they limit themselves to "probably".

John Wesley's Sermon No 2, the "Almost Christian", quotes Acts 26:28 to describe this. "You almost persuade me to be a Christian". This is the "Probably" Christian stage. "Honest, truthful, charitable, outwardly religious, temperate, devout, church going, sincere". But, here's the crunch, "someone who doesn't really know Jesus as a friend and Saviour". John Wesley himself was in that stage until his heart was strangely warmed at Aldersgate.

The "Probably" Christian might be described as "so near and yet so far".

Stage 3: The "Definitely" Christian - Believing is seeing

So what happened to Thomas next? How did he become the "Definitely" Christian? What did the disciples say that convinced Thomas to be there the next time? "We had a nice service last week Thomas, good sermon, sung some great hymns, had a great time of fellowship, and the coffee and biscuits were really great!".

Would that have convinced Thomas to come? Maybe? Probably? Not definitely. But they said much more. Wouldn't you have said more, if you had been them? You'd have said, "Jesus was there. We met with the risen Christ. We spoke to Him. He spoke to us. He is alive. Come next week, and you can meet Him too!"

When we invite others to church, I wonder what we say to them? Do we say: "Do come and join us, it's a lovely fellowship, nice people, warm and welcoming, we sing some lovely songs, there are lots of other activities that we can offer. It only lasts an hour, and we've got a nice local preacher coming next week". Or do we say, "You must come, because last week I met with the risen Christ. I spoke to Him. He spoke to me. He is alive. Come, and you can meet Him too!"

When the disciples said that to Thomas, wild horses wouldn't have kept him away. Thomas did meet the risen Lord that second Sunday. He saw and he believed. He moved from "probably" to "definitely". He declared "My Lord and my God". He had all the evidence he needed. He knew Jesus had risen from the dead, He knew he was saved from his sins. He knew he had the promise of eternal life.

You may say, "That's OK for Thomas, because he actually saw the bodily risen Jesus. How can we offer that to others today? We can't see Jesus physically" But remember those things you believe which you cannot see, because of their effect. We can see the effect He has had and is having today. 2 Billion believers. We don't have to see Him to believe in Him. We can experience the effect. Those first witnesses were so sure they went to their death proclaiming it as true.

Final Thoughts

I find it harder to believe that the world in which we live is a chance occurrence, than to believe it is the wonderful work of a unique and all powerful Creator God. Paradoxically, not only is seeing believing, but believing is seeing.

One final point. Would we all be members of a church, hearing the Word of God, worshipping Him, praying to Him, singing to Him, if He had not risen from death?

No other religious leader claimed to be the Son of God. No other religious leader demonstrated victory over death. No other religious leader offers free forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Peter said to the crowd after the resurrection "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses to the fact." Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe". That's us.

We need not be "Maybe" Christians. We need not even be "Probably" Christians. We need not be doubting Thomas's forever. We can be "Definitely" Christians.

Social distancing can't stop us from meeting Jesus today – He draws close to us. Let's be like Thomas in his third stage, so we can proclaim, "My Lord and My God!" And let's tell more people that we've met Him, and they can meet Him too.

Take a time to sit quietly

A time of prayer

Into the closed doors of this world
come, Lord, and speak your word of peace and life

We pray for all those who are afraid at this time.

We pray for all those who are ill and for those who
yearn for their health.

We pray for those who are homeless and for those
who struggle to feed themselves and their families.

We pray for those who have lost their incomes or
whose businesses are at risk.

We pray for all those who offer care during this crisis
often putting their lives at risk to do so.

We pray for our government and all the governments
of the world, for business leaders and all who hold any
power.

We pray for those who feel voiceless and powerless.

We pray for those situations that no longer make the
headlines for those suffering from conflicts, war and
oppression, for those seeking refuge and those who
have no place of safety.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father

Hymn: Listen to Now the green blade rises (StF 306)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwVEIxBp-0>

Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,
wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

In the grave they laid him, Love who had been slain,
thinking that he never would awake again,
laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:

Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain,
he that for the three days in the grave had lain,
quick from the dead my risen Lord is seen:

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
then your touch can call us back to life again,
fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:

John Macleod Campbell Crum (1872-1958) (alt.)

or

Lord I lift your name on high (StF 332)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6l6orjM3NI>

**Lord, I lift your name on high,
Lord, I love to sing your praises;
I'm so glad you're in my life,
I'm so glad you came to save us.**

**You came from heaven to earth
to show the way,
from the earth to the cross
my debt to pay,
from the cross to the grave,
from the grave to the sky:
Lord, I lift your name on high.**

Rick Founds

or sing a verse of a hymn that comes to mind

A prayer of blessing

May the light of the resurrection shine on your way
May the peace of the resurrection hold you fast
And may the abundant life of the resurrection fill you
and empower you
And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy
Spirit be with you now and always.

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