

Sunday 19th April 2020

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, though separate let us worship together in God.

Hymn Hark what a sound, and too divine for hearing,
 stirs on the earth and trembles in the air!
 Is it the thunder of the Lord's appearing?
 Is it the music of his people's prayer.

 Surely he cometh, and a thousand voices
 shout to the saints, and to the deaf are dumb;
 surely he cometh, and the earth rejoices,
 glad in his coming who hath sworn: I come!

 This hath he done, and shall we not adore him?
 This shall he do, and can we still despair?
 Come, let us quickly fling ourselves before him,
 cast at his feet the burden of our care.

 Through life and death, through sorrow and through sinning,
 he shall suffice me, for he hath sufficed:
 Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,
 Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ.

 F. W. H. MYERS (1843-1901)

Prayer

Eternal God, source, creator and sustainer of life, to you be all praise now and forever.

You are the source of all life from a single cell to the complexity of humanity, from the smallest insect to the mighty elephant, from the most delicate flower to the tallest oak, all rests in you and comes from you.

Forgive us, when by our actions we harm life.

You are the creator, weaving energy and matter you have transformed space and time, adorning them with stars, planets and moons, you have breathed life into all life, creating animals and plants as the melody of creation whilst our diversity offers the harmony. When we gaze upon the wonder of the earth we see your love in the beauty and splendour, in the colours and sounds, in the ongoing creation of new life.

Forgive us, when in our selfishness we destroy creation, threatening the life of plants and animals.

You are the sustainer of life, in you we have our being, in oneness in you we have all we need and more and in the generosity of creation we are invited to share.

Forgive us when we forget to love, when we hoard things and deny others the essentials of life, when our words and actions hurt others, and through oneness we hurt ourselves, distorting the image of you we offer to the world.

Eternal God, source, creator and sustainer of life, in you is all love and all forgiveness,

The Lord's prayer

Readings 1 Peter 1:3-9
 John 20:19-31

Poem

AFTER EASTER

It was an April evening,
the Elder's work was done,
and he before his bungalow door
was sitting in the sun;
and by him sported on the green
his little grandchild Gwendoline.

She heard her brother Christopher
sing something long and loud,
which he that very morning
had heard the church choir sing.
He came to ask what it was all about
this message that they had shouted out.

The Elder listened to the boy,
who stood expectant by;
and then the old man shook his head,
and with a natural sigh
Tis the resurrection story,' said he,
'tis that famous victory.'

'I've heard it every Easter
and many of them there's been
since the minister came here years ago
and there's not many more to, go.
But every year I've heard the story
of that very famous victory.

'But tell us what it was all about,'
young Christopher he cries;
and little Gwendoline looks up
and with wonder waiting eyes;
'Now tell us all about the fight
that sets the world to right.'

'It was the Roman soldiers
who hung him on a cross;
but what the victory was
I never could make out.
But the minister says,' quoth he
'that 'twas a famous victory.'

In fact it was the Sunday after
that the disciples came to know
what this event was all about.
That day Jesus came and showed them
his nail-holed hands spread wide
and an open, wounded side.

That was when they saw it
it was not that he had not died
that no hurt had come his way
it was that he had, and it did.
But the powers of hate, fear and pain.
had lost their power to reign.

This is where the victory lies
not in painless happy endings
or in ghostly figures on lonely roads
but in the crucified one who lives
and who forever deserves the glory
of that very famous victory.

*Words by Graham Cook
after Robert Southey's 'After Blenheim'
Taken from the 1991 Prayer Handbook*

Hymn

Ent'ring in the holy city,
crowds surround them as they walk,
laying leaves before their progress
on the road that leads to love.

No one knew how things would turn out,
breaks in trust, betrayal, loss
in a week where dark descended
on the road that leads to love.

Friends and followers would gather
round a table for a meal,
suddenly the mood was shattered
on the road that leads to love.

On a cross their friend was murdered,
threatening all their hopes and dreams,
yet despite this they continued
on the road that leads to love.

From the darkness of a cavern,
shone a light direct from God,
offering hope for all to follow
on the road that leads to love.

Here for us the path of promise,
here the way to find true self,
building bonds and showing oneness
on the road that leads to love.

Heather Whyte 2019
Tune Sussex R&S 353

Reflection

Graham Cook's poem reminds us that we have just celebrated the great story of Easter, which of course sits within an even greater story of humanity's relationship with God, which is part of an even greater story of creation which is part of another story we have yet to discover. Theologians often talk about the meta-narrative, or the bigger picture and sometimes we get glimpses of this within smaller stories. The story of Thomas is a well-known story, possibly so well known that we have become immune to its full importance. It is a complex story with some very strange aspects, and perhaps it is better regarded as two stories.

Verses 19 – 23 tell us about the disciples after the death of Jesus. They are scared, hiding away in a locked room. John implies that this is the evening of Easter day, the previous verses having told us of Jesus appearance to Mary Magdalene in the garden, an experience we are told she has shared with the disciples but it does not seem to have had much effect. Suddenly, they become aware of a presence with them in the locked room, a presence so strong that they are all happy to testify to it later, then they hear a voice saying, 'Peace be with you'. They make a connection and 'recognise' Jesus and are aware that he is showing them his hands with the marks of crucifixion. Then comes a passage which echoes with the story of Pentecost, the giving of the Spirit and the 'commissioning'. It is thought by many that the gospel of John was written/published around 85-90 Common Era (AD in old money), it is likely that the book of Acts was written/published between 80-85 Common Era so the author of John may have read the book of Acts and added in his own take on the purpose of the disciples. We must remember this is story and not fact, it is a mechanism for sharing the story within the bigger framework.

We then move to part two of our story. We can imagine the excitement following the events of 19-23, and the enthusiasm of those present to share this with those who were not present. One of those not present was the disciple Thomas. We might assume that Thomas has heard Mary's account of her experience in the garden, which we are assuming had not had a great effect on the disciples who still locked themselves away, now we are told that Thomas is no more impressed with the story of those present in the locked room – I will only believe if I see it with my own eyes. There are times when we might all be tempted to say those words. Fast forward a week and we have a similar scenario, disciples in a locked room, but this time Thomas is present. Jesus becomes present, and turns to Thomas offers him his hands and his wounded side, from which we might surmise that

Jesus had been present when the disciples told Thomas about the first experience, although there is no mention of this, but how else would he have known what Thomas needed as proof? There is no suggestion that Thomas takes Jesus up on the offer, but he does acknowledge not just the presence of Jesus but gives us his belief about Jesus, he sees, and he knows. At this point, the author has Jesus saying that Thomas believes because he has seen but others 'have believed without seeing and are blessed'. The grammar of this statement intrigues me, we might have expected it to read 'blessed will be those who have not seen but come to believe' but it doesn't. Now this may be a clue to the date of this gospel as the church was well established so many had believed without seeing, it may be a grammatical slip-up, or it may be part of the cosmic nature of the Christ revealing a knowledge outside time and space. I don't know the answer, but I am intrigued. I am also intrigued by the final two verses, which many believe to be the original ending of the gospel, where we read that this is just part of the story written that we may come to believe that Jesus is the son of God and through our belief have life in his name.

So what do you believe? Peter, in his first letter, tries to answer that question. He begins with the resurrection and shares his understanding that it is through the resurrection we are given a new birth into a living hope, an inheritance which is eternal even if in this life we are find ourselves suffering. Peter is clear that this is because of our love, despite not having seen Jesus, in fact he says even though we do not see him now we believe in him and rejoice. The resurrection is a difficult topic, what did happen, and what does it mean? Graham Cook talks of a great victory, a victory over pain and hate and fear, a victory over death itself and its power to paralyse us with fear. We live in a risk averse society where everything is measured and yet today we face one of the greatest challenges humanity has faced for decades, a reminder that we are not in control, even with all our modern technology. Thomas is often referred to as doubting Thomas, which I have often felt is a little unfair and tend to use questioning Thomas instead. It struck me that a life of faith is a bit like tightrope walking where our success depends on balancing hope in times of suffering with questions in times of confusion. I imagine that the disciples were quite confused, I think I would have been. What were they to make of what they had experienced and seen; no wonder Thomas questions yet another wild story? I wonder what the purpose was of including this story. It is a resurrection story, and for me the resurrection is what seals the ministry of Jesus into history, it is why I am a part of something called the Christian Church. Would I have expressed it as a victory, possibly not, I tend to think that victory implies a battle of some kind and I resist the idea that the death of Jesus was about some great cosmic battle. Could I see myself as Thomas, very likely, I have a reputation for asking questions! Anthropologist Angeles Arrien explores what it is to live fully and concludes there are four facets

- Show up, choose to be present
- Follow what has heart and meaning
- Tell the truth without blame or judgment
- Be open to outcome, not attached to outcome

Looking at this list in the light of the gospel message, we are to be active participators in creation not bystanders, we also must live in the now rather than the past or the future. We are to discern the most loving action and have the courage to follow through whatever the personal cost. We are to be honest in our beliefs, and take responsibility for our actions; and being open to outcomes means we do not second guess them, we give it our best shot and don't worry if the outcome is not what we expected, it is our actions that are more important. If Easter is about new birth into a living hope it is the living bit that is most important, it is not about avoiding death but about living fully in the hope that death is not the end but the beginning.

As we face a continued period of lockdown there are some who still do not understand why we need to lockdown, it is not to protect ourselves, although for the most vulnerable there is an element of this, it is to protect others and to give doctors and nurses, researchers and creators, the best chance to create an environment in which we can safely co-habit with this new form of coronavirus.

Lockdown is an act of love. Thousands have died, in the saddest of circumstances, and our hearts are heavy when we hear the stories, but we believe death is not the end. If the resurrection stories mean anything it is that we should not fear death because we live in the hope of the living Christ. This Easter let us resolve to live fully whatever our circumstances and to carry forward the lessons we learn to enable us to live fully when lockdown ends.

Prayer

Jesus, stand among us.

*Break down the doors of doubt
and speak your word of peace.*

*Speak peace to those who doubt the victory of good:
families who have tasted the bitterness of tragedy;
peoples who have never known freedom from the yoke of domination;
individuals who have received nothing but opposition
to their overtures of peace .*

*Speak peace to those who doubt there is a future for the world:
arms negotiators who see little or no progress;
peace women and men who see nothing but futile escalation;
towns and villages which hear nothing but the stamp of soldiers' feet.*

*Speak peace to those who doubt they are forgiven:
those weighed down by guilt of long ago,
tormented by vivid memories of anger and hate;
those who seek escape in drugs
and refuge in forgetfulness;
those families divided over trivial incidents or more deep-seated conflict.*

*Speak peace to those who doubt you are alive:
those who have been hurt by Christian narrowness;
those who are afraid of death;
those who are surrounded by scepticism;
those who feel weak and inadequate.*

Jesus, Lord and God

by your risen power

dispel our doubt and fear

and we will be your children of peace. (David Jenkins, taken from the 1987 Prayer Handbook)

Loving God, in the midst of confusion you offer hope, in the midst of darkness you offer light. In the coming week be with us as we continue in isolation, help us to remember that isolation is not separation we are still one in you. Give us courage when the stories on the news frighten us, momentarily overcoming our hope. Be with our families and friends and encourage us by your Spirit to keep in touch through the wonder of technology. We pray for those who live in limited space, for those whose circumstances are threatening, for those who fear for their livelihoods as the lockdown continues, may they, through the miracle of your Spirit, sense a glimmer of hope, receive the support they need and may love dispel fear. We continue to pray for those who are caring for the sick and vulnerable, supporting communities and putting their own health at risk for the sake of others. As we move forward as resurrection people, may we be inspired to new understanding and fresh commitment to living the way of Jesus. In Jesus name we pray, amen.

Hymn

All my hope on God is founded;
he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

Human pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray our trust;
what with care and toil is builded,
tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power
hour by hour
is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom, passing thought;
splendour, light and life attend him,
beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore
from his store
new-born worlds
rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty giver
bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth
pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand
at his hand;
joy doth wait
on his command.

Still from earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call
one and all;
ye who follow
shall not fall.

ROBERT BRIDGES (1844-1930) altd.*

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.