

Sunday, 26th April 2020 - Luton & Dunstable URC Pastorate

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. (©H. Whyte)

Hymn:

- 1 Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son;
endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.
Angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away,
kept the folded grave clothes where thy body lay.
*Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son:
Endless is the victory, thou o'er death hast won.*

- 2 Lo! Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb;
lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom.
Let his church with gladness, hymns of triumph sing;
for her Lord now liveth, death hath lost its sting.
Refrain

- 3 No more we doubt thee, glorious prince of life!
Life is nought without thee; aid us in our strife;
make us more than conquerors, through thy deathless love:
Bring us safe through Jordan to thy home above.
Refrain

Edmund Budry (1854-1932) tr. R. B. Hoyle (1875-1939)

Prayer:

Wherever we have been with God this week - perhaps in our garden, perhaps in our 'at home' work place - and wherever we may be with God next week, let's come together in spirit now to worship and praise Him.

God of all lands and nations, we offer our praise and thanks for all the blessings which we know you give to us whether we receive them consciously or unconsciously. The brightness and warmth of the sunshine fill our lives with your love and light. The emergence and colour of the leaves and the blossom bring us comfort and hope of new life. The cheerful singing of the birds and the echo of the silence fill us with calm and peace.

You are at work around us.

God of all people everywhere, we thank you for those who are working tirelessly for the sake of others, for those who volunteer to help, for those prepared to go the extra mile to ensure that your love and care are shown in their words and their actions. So many people would say they are simply doing their job, but we know that the current situation calls for them to go way beyond that and we are grateful for all that is being done to keep us safe.

You are at work around us.

God of love and hope, we thank you for the patience, the ingenuity, the creativity, the talents which are being discovered and employed to enable us to come together, to remain in contact, to find different ways of being united in your name.

You are at work around us.

So let us join together in spirit to say the words which your Son, our friend and Saviour taught us:

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.

Perceptions:



Think you you can't be fooled?

You just were. Read it again.

Is the glass half full or is it half empty? Is the notice board picture deceiving us? Some folk invariably see the glass one way or the other. How we see the glass may depend on how we are feeling. In times of despair we can be frozen into only seeing the difficulties or the challenges. It may be harder to see the potential for moving forward. In the picture we may firstly see what we expect to be there or we may be impatient that someone didn't proof read the material as they should have. I have an ex colleague who would delight in 'red penning' any notice which was not totally correct, and traditionally correct at that! We see what we want to see, what we expect to see. On this occasion we can smile when reading what is *really* there. On others we lose patience because of our own stress or pain.

How can we go forward this week.....? How shall we go forward this week.....?

Reading: Luke 24, vv 13-35

Reflection:

How could they NOT have known? It doesn't seem possible. Yet we may have walked past a friend in the street not seeing them. Or met someone we knew out of context and been unable to place them - was it through work, or through church, or Heartland, or a club? But really, how could those disciples not have recognised the stranger who walked alongside? Their sorrow and grief prevented them from seeing the person who walked alongside.

Sometimes it is not only sorrow, grief or trouble, but joy too which prevents us from seeing what others are going through. Our own preoccupations narrow our field of vision and prevent us seeing, understanding or responding to another's needs or responding to the need for change.

How could Jesus hold back from revealing himself to them? The distress of the two men on that road to Emmaus would have been obvious; how could Jesus not reveal himself? Sometimes we understand things better when we think we have discovered them for ourselves! Some things are more powerful when the preparation and the groundwork are complete. If you listen to Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge over troubled water", the full orchestration of the theme is withheld until almost the end of the song. What power and uplift we hear and feel when that builds up! Jesus allows the men on the road to speak, to pour out all their confusion, and it is then he responds with amazing, vibrant and powerful teaching.

The two men explain to the unrecognised Jesus all that had happened in Jerusalem: their hopes that the prophet was a saviour, the awful betrayal by their own leaders, the horrific sentence and crucifixion, the empty tomb seen by women and men. All of this came tumbling out of the men on the road. It's almost as if talking to the stranger gave them the opportunity to break out of a never-ending circle of anxiousness by talking about it to someone else.

Only then was Jesus able to teach. Teaching, as always, rooted in the Scriptures, but made real and alive by his own interpretation which spoke straight into their hearts. What an experience! It was only afterwards that Cleopas and his companion were able to acknowledge the thrill to the heart that Jesus' teaching caused them.

Can you remember the last time the word of God really burned within you and inspired you? Whether we are together or apart we need to create and recreate opportunities to be inspired and warmed by Scripture. It may be through reading our Bibles and reading a new passage or re-reading a well loved passage from a different perspective. It may be through prayer or through hearing or reading someone else's thoughts. It may be through meditation. Let us create and recreate those opportunities.

By the time the three men reached Emmaus were they all friends or still two friends and a stranger? That's hard to say, but Cleopas and his friend invited Jesus to stay. It was already late. It was then, at the table, that Jesus, the guest, broke bread and gave it to them so that he, Jesus, was revealed and made known. They saw, they recognised, they understood! I am reminded of the hymn (R&S 441) "Be known to us in breaking bread, but do not then depart...". The truth, of course, is that once revealed in that way, Jesus was and is ever present. Cleopas and his friend, in their understanding, didn't hang around discussing what had happened, they upped sticks and returned to Jerusalem to be with the other disciples and to add their testimony of what happened. "It is true."

How is God revealed to us? How do we recognise God in actions and in others? We see God in nature, we see God in positive actions and in friendly faces. What should we do to ensure we see God in the barren places, in the times of hardship or fear or injustice, in the faces of those who are suspicious or hostile? We have the hindsight that Jesus' disciples did not have in those days following Good Friday and that first resurrection morning. We have seen God at work in the awfulness of the cross and in the confusion of the empty tomb. We have also seen God at work through the people of God in the food banks, in the disaster zones, in the NHS during the coronavirus lockdown, in community action that seems so much stronger, so much more welcoming, generous and positive than we could ever have thought possible.

Throughout the Bible passage the human story alternates with the spiritual story. The confused, grieving men, the arrival of Jesus, the re-telling of the human tragedy, the inspiration of Scripture, the human hospitality, the revelation of Jesus alive, the human response to do and to tell in returning to Jerusalem. The human story and God's story alternate, and yet they are one and the same story. As the people of God, our story and God's story are one and the same. Let us walk closely with God this week.

*When Jesus was revealed to the two men at the table in Emmaus, they were spurred to action, to return to Jerusalem. Just as our sorrow, grief, trouble or joy can prevent us from **seeing** what others are going through, so can those emotions help us to **understand** what others are going through. Let us, like them, be spurred to action, let God work within us so that we may play our part as the people of God in our communities. Amen*

Hymn: R&S 306

Spirit of flame, whose living glow
was known to prophet, saint and seer,
where faith is cold thy fire bestow,
where love is distant draw thou near!
Apostles venture in thy power;
so fill us in this present hour.

Spirit of peace, for healing grace
a parched world waits in dry despair;
break through the clouds that hide thy face,
for hope unconquered knows thee there:
humble our pride and come as guest,
most hidden and most manifest.

Spirit of truth, thy blinding light
must needs be tempered to our eyes;
yet dawn upon our darkened sight
with freedom as our dearest prize:
with torch of truth held high above,
help us to cast out fear by love.

Spirit of love, all souls are thine,
redeemed and claimed by love unpriced;
O seeking love, do thou incline
our hearts to love and follow Christ;
Love that is stronger than our fears,
uplift our hearts through coming years.

A. H. Driver (1897-1968) © United Reformed Church (Tune: David's Harp)

Prayers:

Gracious God, forgive us for the times when we fail to recognise you, when we do not see how you are at work in our lives, when we are too full of our own concerns. We know that when this happens, we are unable to be your true disciples. We say and do things which are unacceptable to you; we ignore opportunities to show your love and care; we fail to act in your name - and we are sorry, forgive us. Generous God, we know that you do offer forgiveness when we truly repent, and You welcome us back with open arms and an open heart. So cleansed and forgiven, we offer our prayers for the world - a world brought together by the current situation, a world where all need to work for the benefit of others.

Loving God we pray for those people who are working long hours to tend and care for the sick and dying - *may we support them in whatever ways we can.*

We pray for people who are doing the essential jobs to enable our daily lives to continue with as little disruption as possible - *may we show them our appreciation whenever we are in contact with them.*

We pray for those who are sick and dying - *may they know the strength and the comfort of your love to uphold them through their hours of need.*

We pray for those who are grieving, unable to share their loss with those closest to them - *may they come to feel your peace.*

We pray for all who are anxious, for all who are suffering mentally or emotionally - *may they feel your arms around them to still their fears and calm their minds.*

We pray for our families and friends, our colleagues and fellowships - *may we feel close to one another in love as we travel this difficult path together in spirit.*

We pray for all those who have responsibilities to bear and for those making decisions - *may they know Your wisdom and Your humility to act in love and kindness.*

Loving God, we pray for ourselves that we may not be so blinded by our own situation that we fail to speak or act in Your name. You are at work around us - *may You be at work within us also.*

Amen

Hymn:

Peace be with you my friend for all of time,
Peace of a kind that sets your life in rhyme.
Peace in your heart and in your mind and soul,
Peace of a kind that makes your life a whole.

Peace be with all folk in this hurting world
So many lost and by the storms are whirled.
Peace can bind all God's children into one,
Healing and helping them to see the sun.

Peace is a calm that lodges deep inside,
Peace is contentment which we cannot hide.
Peace stems from love and has no place for fear;
It's to be cherished and to be held dear.

Peace is a gift, and we must pass it on;
it comes from God, just as He gave His Son.
It's not for us to keep or hold too tight;
it's to be shared, so we can spread its light.

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Blessing:

Wherever our walk of life may take us this week, let us walk with God. May we see more clearly, follow more nearly and love more dearly, as we walk in Jesus' way.

And the love, comfort and hope that Jesus offers will surround us and bless us as we go. Amen