

Morning Service for Sunday 18 April, 2021

From the United Reformed Church at Morpeth, Widdrington and Gt Bavington.

Welcome and Introduction

Hymn 383 Come let us with the Lord arise

Come, let us with our Lord arise,
our Lord, who made both earth and skies;
who died to save the world he made,
and rose triumphant from the dead;
he rose, the Prince of life and peace,
and stamped the day forever his.

This is the day the Lord has made,
that all may see his love displayed,
may feel his resurrection's power,
and rise again, to fall no more,
in perfect righteousness renewed,
and filled with all the life of God.

Then let us render him his own,
with solemn prayer approach his throne,
with meekness hear the gospel word,
with thanks his dying love record,
our joyful hearts and voices raise,
and fill his courts with songs of praise.
Charles Wesley

Hand Prayers (Written by Alan Stinson courtesy of engageworship.org)

To aid our focus whilst praying, we will make and hold physical positions with our hands. We do this to engage our bodies within our prayers, allowing our minds to focus more freely on what we are praying about.

Praying Hands

First place your palms and fingers flat together, with your hands pointing upwards; in the position traditionally adopted to pray.

We come to be still before God

Our hands together, stopping us undertaking physical work.

We take up the work of an intercessor, bringing our earthly concerns before our Heavenly Father.

*Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness.
You set me at liberty when I was in trouble;
Have mercy on me and hear my prayer.*

[Psalm 4.1]

Fists

Separate your hands, and clench them together to form fists. Hold them as tightly as you can, so that your focus is on your fists.

We pray for those parts of the world afflicted by violence.

We remember those in violent relationships.

Where talking has been replaced by fighting.

Where peace has been replaced by aggression and unrest

Wounded hand

Open both your fists. Hold your left hand so your palm faces towards you. Take the index finger on your right hand and push it hard into the centre of your left palm.

Jesus' hands were pierced as he was crucified

He was wounded to restore our relationship with God

He suffered to bring reconciliation and justice to the world.

We focus on situations and places where that reconciliation is needed, both in our own lives, our community and the wider world.

Open hands

Open both of your hands, hold them open in front of you with your palms facing upwards.

We recognise that all of humanity needs to receive good things.

God provides for each of us physically, emotionally and spiritually

We ask God for the things we need, and the things needed by others

Holding hands

Turn over your left hand, with your right hand gently take hold of your left as if holding someone else's hand.

Jesus embodied God's compassion

He met with the sick and the dying

He promised comfort to those who mourn

We pray for those who are sick, suffering or mourning

We pray that they will know God's healing, comfort, compassion and love

Praying hands

We return our hands to the first position we held. Palms and fingers flat together, hands pointing upwards; the position traditionally adopted for prayer.

We remember God's promise to hear our prayers

Praying to the Father, in the name of the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Reading: 1 John 3:1-7

Hymn: How deep the Father's love for us

How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss –
The Father turns His face away,
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory.

Behold the man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders;
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life –
I know that it is finished.

I will not boast in anything,
No gifts, no power, no wisdom;
But I will boast in Jesus Christ,
His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer;
But this I know with all my heart –
His wounds have paid my ransom.

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Reading from Scripture

Readings: Luke 24: 36b – 48

Readings: Acts 3: 12-19

Sermon

We have been listening to and remembering the Easter story, and the picture we get from reading the gospels is of a group of disciples being locked away, behind closed doors for fear of what the authorities would do to them. As far as they are concerned the story is over. Jesus has died. It is finished.

It is not a favourable retelling of events. It doesn't really paint the disciples in a good light. You can imagine years later, when the disciples are involved in writing these things down, they would be thinking "Do we really need to include this? Do we really need to tell everyone that we just ran away and hid? Do we really need to tell everyone that our faith was so

weak, or understanding of what Jesus told us so shallow?"

They have no thought of mission, or of carrying on the work that Jesus left them to do. All that is forgotten. They are now in self preservation mode, just trying to stay alive. They are locked away from the world, afraid to go out.

And some of the strongest evidence I think there is for the truth about the risen Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit, is the change that happens to cause the disciples to be so confident in their faith – that they may go about healing, and preaching in Jesus name with no fear at all of the consequences.

In just these three pages – between John's gospel and the disciples being locked in the room – to today's reading and Peter standing up against the authorities – we see such a dramatic transformation in that group of disciples.

And we focus on Peter today in our readings, and our reflections.

Peter was the one who on that Thursday night, could not even admit to knowing Jesus. Each time he was asked, do you know this man, he denies it. But now he stands, in the Temple of Jerusalem, and preaches the good news in the name of that same Jesus. He is in an area of the temple, a kind of cloister, that was believed to be the surviving remnant of Solomon's Temple. And it is here, all the people come rushing to Peter and John to hear how this miracle they have performed has come about.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, the apostles were going all over the place, preaching and working wonders by the Holy Spirit, calling on the name of Jesus to heal people. Peter heals a crippled beggar at the Temple in Jerusalem and Peter just can't help now but preach the good news to the crowd that has gathered, it just spews out of them, in a great fervour.

Peter stands up in the Temple surrounded by the Jewish people and says to perhaps the very same people who he was in fear of on that Maundy Thursday, he says to them :

"You rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has

given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.”

You can imagine what impact that this had on the Jewish leaders, to be told that the person they killed, the person they hoped they had silenced once and for all, had been raised from the dead and his name continues to live on despite everything they have done.

But here Peter and John stand as witnesses that God has raised Jesus from the dead. This Peter, who denied Jesus when he was alive, now professes as a witness to the risen Jesus. This Peter who hid away for fear of being noticed by the authorities, now stands in the Temple, preaching to the crowds in some sort of evangelistic rally.

They are witnesses not only to the events that happened, of Jesus dying and rising to life. But they are witnesses to the things that continue to happen in the name of Jesus. Peter says, this healing you have seen is nothing that we have done, but has been done in the power of the name of Jesus. So they are witnesses to the events of Jesus’ dying and rising to life. They are witnesses to the events that continue to occur in the name of Jesus. But they are witnesses to what happened to them in their lives that has caused such a radical transformation in them.

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Peter knows that the reality of the risen Jesus and the power that still is commanded in his name. Peter heals the crippled man and knows its nothing to do with him – that there is something real and tangible about Jesus resurrection that is working through them – he says “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man you see and know has been made strong”

Peter and John are witnesses to the power of the name of Jesus – they say “We don’t know how it happens. It just does. Look and see for yourselves.” This alone is how healing has come – you can have as many theories as you like, you can have as many ways of healing as you like – but it is through this name alone that this man has been healed. This Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

For those of you familiar with the stories of C.S.Lewis, you will be aware of Aslan, the great lion, who has been used to convey truths about Jesus to millions of children all around the world. There is a great scene in the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe when the Mr

and Mrs Beaver are explaining to the children about Aslan. And the narrator says this:

“None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different. .... At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in it's inside. Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of Summer.”

The power of a name. There was power in the name Aslan, and power in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. For the council, that name brought fear. To the crippled man, the name brought healing.

The name of Jesus has the power to transform. It transformed Peter from denying Christ, to standing as witness before all the people of Israel. It has the power to transform a bunch of cowering disciples, into a dynamic missional community going to all the corners of the world.

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I quite enjoy watching the drama series on TV, especially the ones where the detectives have to solve the murder. Sometimes the series starts by showing you, usually, a murder being carried out, and then you are led with the detectives who begin to piece together information and evidence as they reconstruct the events that happened in order to solve the murder. Part of the attraction of such shows is that we as a viewer are privileged to information that the characters in the story are not – and that gives us a good feeling and makes the series more watchable.

But sometimes you as a viewer are not shown what happens, the series opens in the aftermath of a murder, and you as a viewer are left to piece together the bits of the story to work out what happened. Just as in a real life court case, we rely on witness testimonies, to piece together a picture of what happened, and left to decide for ourselves whether this is what really happened or not.

In the reading from Luke, Jesus says to the disciples “You are witnesses of these things.”

In the reading from Acts, Peter says to the crowd that has gathered “We are witnesses of this.”

Today we are left to hear the testimonies of these witnesses and decide for ourselves what really happened.

The disciples are witnesses to what happened with Jesus dying and rising to life.

The disciples are witnesses to the healing and miracles that continued to occur in the name of Jesus.

The disciples are witnesses to the transformation that came in them, being transformed from a cowering group in fear of death, to those who were prepared to die for what they believed and knew.

The Greek word in the new testament that we translate for witness is the word martyr. The disciples call themselves martyrs. A martyr is someone who witnesses to the truth, even unto death. And that's what they did. Peter and John in the next chapter are dragged before the Sanhedrin but escape death, in the next couple of chapters Stephen too is brought before the Sanhedrin and is stoned to death and becomes the first Christian martyr. They were witnesses even unto death.

What made them change? What was it that stopped them being so afraid of the authorities and of the punishment that might be inflicted on them - to then standing up before the authorities willing to suffer death for what they knew to be true? It has to be that encounter with the risen Christ. Jesus comes and sits with them, eats with them, and opens their minds to the scriptures and helps them understand everything he has taught them.

We are the witnesses today.

We are the ones who can witness to the truth.

You are the witnesses of this.

And you don't need to be theologically trained and understand the doctrine of the trinity, you don't need to be able to deliver sermons with really funny stories, or be able to give really clever illustrations to get a meaning across.

I find the most powerful and convincing witnesses are those who say, "Look, I don't know what it all means, or how its supposed to work, all I know is how my life is changed because of God and because of Jesus."

You are all witnesses.

We are all called to be witnesses.

We are witnesses to the truth that is in the bible, in the scriptures.

We are witnesses to the truth that we see about us, all the good and amazing things that are done in the name of Jesus today. Where the church has helped to change communities. Where faith has transformed

lives. Where God has spoken to us in nature and through our brothers and sisters.

We are witnesses to the truth of how our lives are changed because of Jesus. It may not be a dramatic change, but we can all recognise ways in which life is good, life is worth it, because of God and because of our faith.

Jesus says to the disciples and to us "You are witnesses of these things"

You can't be a witness and keep this to yourself. And its not about just talking to people about faith, because that scares us to think we have to talk to others about our faith. But in the way we live our lives, in the values that we hold, in the way we treat others around us, all this speaks the truth of what we believe and what we know to be true.

A witness has to share what they know otherwise nobody will hear the truth. And if we don't speak the truth or live the truth, then there are plenty more versions of reality being spoken and lived in our society today, that are not true. We have to share this truth with others around us, otherwise they will never get to understand what really happened through Jesus dying and rising to life.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Lord Jesus Christ, we pray together in your name.

As a church we pray together for those who are struggling.

Awaken us to the pain of those in poverty,  
Those who are sick, or sorrowing, or victims of  
violence and war.

May we discover our common humanity with them  
and learn the art of finding Jesus in each sister and  
brother.

There is so much we can do, and so much we can't do,  
But we believe you call each of us to play our part  
In building your kingdom here on earth.

Where your people have lost their way  
and fallen into decline or complacency,  
give them eyes to see  
and ears to hear your summons to mission.

We face difficult times when the future is uncertain.  
We grasp blindly for the way ahead,  
Where your Church is vibrant and growing,  
give your people confidence to share with others  
the lessons they are learning.  
Give us courage and humour for what lies ahead.

Fill us with wisdom to face the world  
and childlike trust in the power and goodness

of your ultimate purposes for all you have made.  
In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Hymn: Lord you give the great commission**

Lord, You give the great commission:  
"Heal the sick and preach the Word."  
Lest the Church neglect its mission,  
And the Gospel go unheard,  
Help us witness to Your purpose  
With renewed integrity,  
With the Spirit's gifts empower us  
For the work of ministry.

Lord, You call us to Your service:  
"In My name baptize and teach."  
That the world may trust Your promise,  
Life abundant meant for each,  
Give us all new fervour, draw us  
Closer in community.  
With the Spirit's gifts empower us  
For the work of ministry.

Lord, You make the common holy:  
"This My body, this My blood."  
Let us all, for earth's true glory,  
Daily lift life heavenward,  
Asking that the world around us  
Share your children's liberty  
With the Spirit's gifts empower us  
For the work of ministry.

Lord, You show us love's true measure:  
"Father, what they do, forgive."  
Yet we hoard as private treasure  
All that You so freely give.  
May Your care and mercy lead us  
To a just society.  
With the Spirit's gifts empower us  
For the work of ministry.

Lord, You bless with words assuring:  
"I am with you to the end."  
Faith and hope and love restoring,  
May we serve as You intend  
And, amid the cares that claim us,  
Hold in mind eternity.  
With the Spirit's gifts empower us  
For the work of ministry.

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**Dismissal and Blessing**