

Meditation for Sunday 26th April (3rd Sunday of Easter)

Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Come, walk with him.
Come, talk with him.
Come, feast with him.
Come, worship Jesus, our risen Lord.

Introduction

Gathering Prayer

God, we are your people.
We walk a journey together,
we talk and share along the way,
we break bread together and, in doing so,
we meet, recognise and know
Jesus is present among us,
when we're in isolation
and when we're in company,
today and always. **Amen.**

Reading: Luke 24 .13-18, (19-26), 27-35

Luke 24 .13-18

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognising him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?'

Luke 24 .27-35

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.
As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the

scriptures to us?’ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Reflection: “The breaking of the bread”.

The Breaking of the Bread refers to a simple action and is a familiar phrase. Its use in the New Testament is interesting.

Over the last week some of you have been taking part in our Easter Course, ‘Praying with Luke’s Gospel’. The links will remain up on the resource site this week so, if you haven’t had a chance to yet, take a look when you can.

Today’s Gospel reading was also from Luke, and it’s Luke alone who uses the phrase “The Breaking of the Bread”. Somehow, Luke tells us, the Risen Christ is recognised as being present in that simple action.

In today’s Gospel we heard how two followers of Jesus encounter him, after the Resurrection, as they walk home to Emmaus. But crucially they don’t recognise him at first. Who were this couple? One is named Cleopas. Now he may be the same person as Clopas in John 19 .25, where Clopas is described as the husband of one of the Marys who stand at the foot of the Cross. Maybe then this is a couple returning home - puzzled, bemused and anxious about what has happened. Their fellow traveller, talks with them on the journey about the scriptures, and as night is falling, they invite him to stay with them. It is only at the meal table that they recognise him - and they do so “in the breaking of the bread”.

Why did they recognise him? There is no suggestion that either of these two were present at the Passover Meal - the Last Supper. Jesus action at their meal table, as he breaks bread, seems unrelated to that. Maybe then Jesus had a characteristic way of breaking or tearing a loaf. He would have shared many, many meals with the disciples in the course of his ministry. Whatever the reason, as he breaks bread he is recognised and the couple become the first people in Luke’s Gospel to see the Risen Christ - although Peter seems to have seen him somehow at about the same time.

Luke also wrote a second book that we know as Acts of the Apostles and there he refers to breaking bread four times. It appears to be a central act of that early Christian community. An action carried out by people in their own homes.

Is this “breaking of the bread” an early form of The Eucharist - our Holy Communion? Or is it something distinct? In Acts it appears to be carried out in ordinary homes, but associated with prayers and fellowship. Luke wrote his Gospel, and Acts, after Paul had written his First Letter to the Corinthians. It’s Paul’s letter which, in Chapter 11, gives us the first reference to the Eucharist which by then has assumed a formal structure and is already bound up with rules. But although writing later, Luke is referring back to the very earliest years of the Church and the believers in Acts seem to be carrying out a much

simpler action - there's no mention of wine - but it is in a simple "breaking of the bread", with no fuss or ceremony, that they are encountering the Risen Christ.

There's been a lot of talk this Easter about whether congregations can share Holy Communion on line, with participants having bread and wine in front of their computer screen. Our three denominations have a variety of opinions on this, and practice has varied.

Maybe we have to leave sharing Holy Communion until we are able to gather together physically. But we can share in "the breaking of the bread" in our own homes - a simple act with no complex formula of words and no rules as to who can lead it or participate.

Incorporate it in your prayer time, with fellowship maybe online or by phone, for Christ will be encountered in your breaking of the bread.

Thanksgiving

Let us pray:

God,
we thank you that in Christ
you come out and meet us where we are.
We thank you that you walk the road with us,
that you treat us as companions
even when we fail to recognise you.
We thank you that you always love us, always care for us,
always want to break bread with us - such is your love.
Thank you, Lord, that you are not a stranger,
but our friend.
We worship and adore you.
Amen.

Closing remarks

Thank you for praying and meditating on scripture with me this morning. If you started watching this at 10.00am on Sunday morning you'll just have time now to make a coffee and then join us, and around 500 others, for a live act of worship from Birmingham Methodist District. It's on Facebook Live but you don't need to be a Facebook user to participate. Again the links are prominent on my resource site the address of which is below.

Take care, stay safe, best of all God is with us.

Let us pray:

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus,
as you walked on the road to Emmaus,
walk with us as we travel on.
Help us to know your presence abiding with us,

and help us to be your presence to others.
In the name of the Risen Christ.
Amen.

Notes: Luke's usage of "breaking bread".

Luke's Gospel

24 .30, 31 *(Jesus) took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.
Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him.*

24 .35 *.... how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the
bread.*

Acts of the Apostles

2 .42 *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship,
to the breaking of the bread and the prayers.*

2 .46 *... they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at
home, and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.*

20 .7 *On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread.*

20 .11 *Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten,
he continued to converse with them.*

Meditation for Easter Day 2020

Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Come with joy.
Come with praise.
Come with expectation and wonder.
He has been raised from the dead!
Come and worship our risen Lord.

Introduction

Gathering Prayer

Risen Lord Jesus,
today we celebrate.
today we share in the joy of your resurrection.
The stone has been rolled away,
death has been defeated,
you have overcome all the powers of darkness.
May we know your risen presence with us today.
Amen.

Reading

Matthew 28 .1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.

For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.'

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Reflection

I feel sorry for the guards! I mean, how would they explain what we just heard? They were guarding a sealed tomb, containing a dead body - or so they thought. Then there's an earthquake, an 'other worldly, weird character appears all dressed in white and rolls the stone away and sits on it. And the bad news for the guards is - there's no body! No wonder the guards shook and fainted with shock. They had a lot of explaining to do!

Once, on a church youth group weekend, we encouraged the young people to act this passage out, and the verses following where the guards are interrogated. Youth leaders played the part of the guards. The questions from the young people, playing the part of the interrogators were vicious and thorough. They cross examined the 'guards' and tried to rip their statements to shreds. How would you explain it? The authorities in Matthew decide to claim that the body was stolen while they slept. A theory that poses more questions than it attempts to answer. Who? Why? How?

The figure that the women encounter at the tomb has a simpler explanation; "He is not here", they say of Jesus, "He has been raised from the dead".

Death, and fear of death, dominates the news at the moment. It's important to remember that the majority of those who contract Covid19 recover at home, some don't even know they have it. The majority of those admitted to hospital recover and return home too. But none of that should mean we get complacent. This is a virus that kills in thousands. We need to follow the advice we have been given; stay at home where possible and stay safe.

Terry Waite, who knows a lot about isolation and being cut off from the world, after spending over 1700 days as a hostage in Beirut from 1987 - 1991 said earlier this week that we need to change our mindset. He said that; "We shouldn't think of ourselves as STUCK at home, we need to remember that we are SAFE at home".

Back at the end of February we began Lent on Ash Wednesday. The liturgy that day focused on our mortality as we were called to "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ".

No one survives life. All die. Lazarus, raised from the dead by Jesus, died again. But the Easter message is that God in Christ has journeyed for us through death. In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead we see that God's love cannot be extinguished even by death itself.

The women, with great joy but also abject fear rushed from the tomb to tell the other disciples. As they did they encountered Jesus who, in their moment of fear and confusion said "Do not be afraid". Let us encounter the Risen Christ in our times of fear and confusion and, reassured like the women, be able to proclaim:

Christ is Risen! Alleluia!

Thanksgiving

Let us pray:

Risen Lord Jesus,
we adore you and praise your name.
Today you defeated death and rose again.
You died on the cross that we might be free.
Thank you, risen Lord, that you did this for us,
so that we might enjoy the freedom of eternal life.
Risen Lord Jesus,
we love you, we worship you, we adore you.
Amen.

Closing remarks

Thank you for worshipping and praying with me this morning.
At 10.30am, on the Birmingham Methodist District site, there's a full act of worship that this week takes the form of a Love Feast. Have bread (or cake) and water at hand, as we'll recall the countless occasions that Jesus shared ordinary meals with his followers. There'll be reflections and a chance to sing as we proclaim the Resurrection.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray these words from Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

Goodness is stronger than evil,
Love is stronger than hate,
Light is stronger than darkness,
Life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours, through him who loves us.
Amen.

Meditation for Holy Week 2020

Hebrews 12 .2

Look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,
who for the sake of the joy that was set before him
endured the cross, disregarding its shame,
and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Welcome to this video meditation for Holy Week. I'm Mike Claridge and I'm Minister of The Cotteridge Church.

The words I started this meditation with were written by an unknown author during the earliest years of the Christian Church. They remind us of the journey we take this, and every Holy Week, recalling the suffering, sacrifice and death of Jesus Christ. But beyond that journey is another - of Resurrection, New Life and an affirmation of God;s Love stronger even than death. Easter is just a week away!

Opening Prayer:

Let us pray:

When the world is tough -
I run to you.

When I am lonely and afraid -
I turn to you.

Grief-stricken and lost -
I cry to you.

When my heart is aching -
I yearn for you.

I seek you out;
I rest in you.
My hiding place;
my life;
my strength.

My love. My hope.

My God.

Amen

*By Karen Campbell who works ecumenically in Luton.
Taken from the United Reformed Church's Prayer Handbook, 'Prayers from the Heart'*

Our streets are silent. How different to normal. How different to the accounts that we hear in the Gospels about this week - Holy Week.

Holy Week began with a crowd waving palms. Later there's a crowd that Jesus disperses in the Temple. The drama unfolds in the crowded streets of Jerusalem at Passover. A crowd with clubs and swords swoop to arrest Jesus. A crowd bays for his blood and urges Pilate and the authorities to crucify him. His torturers crowd around him beating and abusing him.

Through all this Jesus is walking the way of the cross. Carrying his wooden burden, but also the burdens we impose on him. Rejection, derision, denial, greed, distrust.

But not all of the events of Holy Week occur in crowds. There are also places of quiet; gardens. Those of you lucky enough to have a garden will doubtless be spending time there this Holy Week. May it be a time of reflection on the quieter moments of Holy Week.

According to Mark's Gospel (Chapter 11), after Jesus was acclaimed by crowds waving palms, he withdrew to the comparative quiet of the village of Bethany. Returning to Jerusalem the next day he pauses in a grove of fig trees before expelling crowds from the Temple. He teaches using images of vineyards and vine dressers, and withdraws to the Mount of Olives for quiet with his friends. Then, after the Passover meal has been shared, Jesus withdraws to the Garden of Gethsemene to pray. It is his last time of silence, although one of agony and wrestling with his thoughts, for soon the arresting crowd fall upon him.

He will be beaten, abused and tortured. Cruel thorns will be used to fashion a crown and placed on his head as he faces the derision of the crowds again. He journeys on to his execution - walking alone, but surrounded by a baying mob.

After his death Jesus' body is taken from the Cross and laid in a garden tomb. Sealed, cold, finished.

But we know that is not the end.

Closing Prayer:

Let us pray:

When all is lost and
hope has been obliterated, when
there is nothing left to hold onto,
there remains -
hope beyond our hoping
life beyond our imagining
joy confounding every expectation.

Honour, glory and praise
be to you,
crucified Lord Jesus.

By Ian Fosten, Minister of Wrentham Chapel, Suffolk

*and Director of the Seagull Community Theatre, Lowestoft..
Taken from the United Reformed Church's Prayer Handbook, 'Prayers from the Heart'*

Meditation for Sunday 29th March 2020

Psalm 130

Ezekiel 37 .1-14

John 11 .1-45

Psalm 130 .5,6

I wait for the Lord, my souls waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who wait for the morning.

Opening Prayer:

Taken from the United Reformed Church's Prayer Handbook called Prayers from the Heart. This prayer is written by Sheila Marsden, an Elder at Wigmore URC and Methodist Church in Luton

Breath of God,
come to these dusty, earth-bound bones:
Free us from the prisons of fear
and from all that holds us in captivity;
release our hearts by the power of your forgiveness.

Breath of God,
come to these dusty, earth-bound bones:
Touch them and reshape them;
tenderly restore them with a living hope;
transform them in your ever-constant love.

The Old Testament reading set for today is a vision received by the prophet Ezekiel. If you want to read the full text (pause the video here and) you'll find it on the resource site or in your bibles at **Ezekiel Chapter 37 verses 1 - 14**.

Ezekiel lived around 2600 years ago. Many of the people of Israel had been taken away in captivity to Babylon by an invading army. Israel's hope, of being God's people, seemed by many to have died and faded away. In the midst of hopelessness, fear and disillusion Ezekiel receives a vision.

In his vision he sees a vast desert valley covered in bones . Dry bones with no sign of life. God speaks in the vision and tells Ezekiel to tell the bones that God will be a source of new life. Ezekiel prophesies and sees the bones being joined up, sinews and flesh covering them. Then God breathes his breath into them and there is new life, a vast multitude.

Ezekiel's vision is of new hope and new life that will emerge through God's love. We may feel that we, as individuals and as a community, are stuck in a valley of dry bones - but hear God's word:

"I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live". (Ezekiel 37 .14)

Today we still have one week of Lent before we enter Holy Week. Today (29th March) the clocks went forward an hour. Spring is well and truly with us and, even with two weeks left before Easter, we can already see new life bursting out around us in our gardens and parks.

I found some consolation this week when I read a comment on Twitter that said, that while humanity is fighting the Corona virus, the reduction in travel by land air and sea, means that slowly the planet is healing. Apparently the waters of the Venetian lagoon and canals are cleaner and clearer than it has been for centuries. You may or may not find consolation in that comment, but for many this week has certainly been one of being able to find some solace in the beauty of the natural world as new life springs forth.

Today's reading from the Gospels (**John 11 .1 - 45** and again the full text is on the site) is a reading about New Life.

Jesus' friend Lazarus has died and his bereaved sisters, Martha and Mary, are angry, confused and questioning. Jesus knew that Lazarus had been ill but he stayed away and made no contact. Jesus himself was fearful to make a journey, because to travel to Bethany where Lazarus and his sisters lived, would be dangerous for him. It was closer to Jerusalem and Jesus knew there were those there who wanted to kill him. He stayed away and Lazarus died. Martha's words in v21 *"If you had been here my brother would not have died"* are words of anger and rage. Where had Jesus been?

Where is God now?

There is nothing wrong with a faith that questions. There is nothing wrong with a faith that has many doubts. At such times as the current crisis we feel like Martha and Mary did. Where is he? Why isn't he here?

Jesus words "I am the Resurrection and the Life" in the Gospel reading today precede his actions in coaxing the risen Lazarus from the tomb. This year our proclamation of The Resurrection, in two weeks time, will precede by many weeks a very real Resurrection when once again we, like Lazarus, will be able to cast off our constraints and walk out into new life.

When that happens may God guide and strengthen us that we may be the Church in new ways, with a new relevance, and cast off the things that have bound us in the past. May Jesus' words about Lazarus be also his words about his Church:

"Unbind him, and let him go." (John 11 .44)

Closing Prayer:

For our closing prayer we return to the United Reformed Church's Prayer Handbook and a prayer written by Jenny Mashford, a member at Fulbourn URC in Cambridgeshire. It focusses on Mary, Martha and Lazarus and how their emotions are our emotions. And strangely, although written last year, this is so appropriate for today.

Why Lord, did you not come?
Why did you not heed our pleas?
We have tried to answer your call,
act in your name,
be who you want us to be.

Yet,
when we were desperate,
you stayed away!
We cried out,
but you didn't answer
until it was too late.

But, just as we had given up -
when we were standing on the verge of despair -
there you are;
gently guiding,
pointing in new directions;
speaking into our hearts,
and inviting us to trust in your unfailing love.

For that is when miracles happen.