

SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Sunday 11 April 2021 | The Second Sunday of Easter

TODAY'S READINGS

Exodus 14.10-end, 15.20-21 | Psalm 133 | Acts 4.32-35 | John 20.19-end



'Jesus and Thomas'
by Ronald Raab

✠ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm sure that many of us have tried to make the most of the opportunities to see people again over the last week or so. The lessening of restrictions bringing with it, albeit in a rather limited way, the chance to see family and loved ones from a distance. Whether that's a coffee on the doorstep, a friendly conversation in the garden, wrapping up warm to share some food and fellowship; there is a great desire to see people we care for face-to-face once again. To share their company and to rejoice in the opportunity to be together once again. This was certainly how I felt, despite being rather cold and windswept on my grandparents' porch last Sunday afternoon, huddled around a small two-bar heater in an effort to keep warm over a cup of tea and a slice of simnel cake. There is joy to be found, as Scripture often reminds us, in the presence of others. The reality that as human beings, created and crafted by God's loving design, it is not good for us to be alone and that life's journey is sweetened and enriched by our sharing it with others.

Such a perspective, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, was shared by the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem. As they began to order their common life in response to the revelation of God's life-giving power in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In the light of Easter the cowering, fearful disciples gathered in the upper room had been transformed into faithful friends of the risen Lord, whose excitement, exuberance and enthusiasm for the faith was undimmed and unreserved.

They recognised that in the shadow of the empty tomb, the world had been turned upside down. God had reframed old certainties with new promises, and that in bearing witness to this message their lives had to testify to the hopeful truth of what God had done. The knowledge of Jesus' return from the dead to be revealed not simply in words of testimony, but in how their lives were to be shaped by the potential and promise of resurrection. How they had been commissioned, as Christ's friends and followers. To declare to others the living reality that their Saviour, Lord and Master was indeed once dead, but was now alive forevermore.

We fail to grasp the significance of Easter and its impact on the world, if we forget that the evidence for Christ's resurrection wasn't just found in the emptiness of the tomb or in the disciples' accounts of their encounters with the risen Lord, but also in how their hearts and lives were dramatically changed. The earliest Christians understood that for others to come to believe and know Jesus as risen, the reality of resurrection was to be written on their hearts, performed in

the work of their hands and made known in how they would model in life together as a community of faith. The kingdom Jesus had declared in his life and established by his death and rising again had indeed been given as a foretaste of heaven on earth, and so this had to mean an alternative way of living for the sake of the world.

To our modern, western, rather individualistic, consumerist context, such a description of the practices and choices of the early Church perhaps seems both unattainable and rather fanciful. It's good and right for the believers to be described as being of '*one heart and soul*' but perhaps a little more irritating, perplexing and condemning of our own attitudes to discover that as a result '*no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common*'. Yet, as we read on, one of the fruits of this living was the absence of any need. No distinction, no division based on status, wealth or position, no demarcation of the undeserving or deserving, instead the gifts of the church were to be distributed based on need rather than perceived entitlement.

As one commentator puts it, 'these followers of Jesus released themselves to one another, making themselves responsible for and accountable to one another'¹. The disciples knew that by trusting in the God who had raised Jesus from the dead, they had in fact been joined together. If the old had gone and the new had come, then by the Spirit of the risen Jesus at work in them, they knew that like it or not they were all in it together, for the building up of each other and the blessing of those around them. By choosing to order their life together in this way the earliest Christians modelled to the world an alternative community. The early Church a living example of what happens when private interest and attempts to secure power and influence over and above others was exchanged for a renewed appreciation of corporate flourishing and well-being. Where the self-giving nature of the God who did not withhold his Son from the pain of the cross was manifested in a desire to pursue all that brought about a renewing of the common good.

Such a commitment to each other, to the world and all people, to work against injustice, oppression, false judgements and cynical complaining wasn't established by accident. The Christian community didn't grow out of compulsion or coercion, through harsh words or manipulation. The faith that proclaimed Jesus as Lord was attractive because it modelled an unconventional but deeply attractive way of understanding and respecting the realities of life. If Christ's resurrection meant that the powers of sin and death were proven to come to naught, then

¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), p 50.

the humanity that Jesus had raised to new life was compelled to find a better way of behaving and belonging together.

We recognise that we've glimpsed something of this, or perhaps re-discovered it, in the generosity, self-sacrifice and kindness that has emerged in this past year. We've lived through a time that even though been separated from each other, we've been encouraged to remember that we depend on others for so much, bringing with it a timely realisation that we don't need to be trapped in the routines of how things have always been. But can choose a better way in which our God-given dignity and worth isn't just affirmed but celebrated. As Martin Luther King Junior preached in 1964, 'we must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools'.

The Archbishop of Canterbury preached last Sunday that 'the church exists to be Jesus Christ to the world' - reminding us that the first Easter commissioned the disciples not with a private hope but a hope that rightly belongs to all people in every place and time. A hope discovered on that third day, as the gospel of John reminds us, when after his appearance to Mary Magdalene at the tomb Jesus came to his fearful disciples and bestowed upon them the gift of his peace. The light of Easter reaches into the pain, muddle and sorrow to kindle new life: the scattered disciples are reunited, Peter's betrayal is reconciled and Thomas' honest, searching doubts find response as he looks upon the scars of crucifixion and knows the testimony of his friends to be true.

The same Jesus who washed the feet of his friends and mandated them to love at his Last Supper now bestows peace and sends them to be his witnesses in the world. A gift and commission which we share, despite feelings of unreadiness and unpreparedness. The call - the same as was heard by those first believers - being of one heart and soul and bound together in belief and action, in order that the good news of Easter might be discerned in and through each of us.

✠ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Collect
for The Second Sunday of Easter

Almighty Father,
you have given your only Son to die for our sins
and to rise again for our justification:
grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness
that we may always serve you
in pureness of living and truth;
through the merits of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Old Testament Reading

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, "Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians"? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.' But Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.'

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went

into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, 'Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.' So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'

Exodus 14.10-end, 15.20-21

New Testament Reading

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Acts 4.32-35

Gospel Reading

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

John 20.19-end

Prayers of Intercession

during Eastertide

In joy and hope let us pray to the Father.
That our risen Saviour may fill us with the joy of his
glorious and life-giving resurrection, we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That isolated and persecuted churches
may find fresh strength in the good news of Easter, we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That God may grant us humility
to be subject to one another in Christian love, we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That he may provide for those who lack
food, work or shelter, we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That by his power war and famine
may cease through all the world, we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That he may reveal the light of his presence to the sick, the weak and the dying,
to comfort and strengthen them, we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That, according to his promises,
all who have died in the faith of the resurrection
may be raised on the last day, we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

That he may send the fire of the Holy Spirit upon his people,
so that we may bear faithful witness to his resurrection, we pray to the Father.

Hear our prayer.

Heavenly Father,
you have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant that, as his death has recalled us to life,
so his continual presence in us may raise us to eternal joy;
through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

THE SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT

CHURCH OF ENGLAND RESOURCES

<https://www.churchofengland.org/>

<https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

<https://www.youtube.com/thechurchofengland>



The Church of England online weekly service for The Second Sunday of Easter can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/c/TheChurchofEngland/videos>

ENGAGING THEOLOGY CUMBRIA

<https://engaging-theology-in-cumbria.org>

Engaging Theology in Cumbria is delighted to launch a series of seminars for 2021 on Zoom, to which all are welcome! In this series, eight theologians explore hope and fear in mission, theological education, the arts, the climate crisis, education, and more, in a Zoom-based series of talks and group discussions that are inclusive, accessible, mission-focused, and, above all, hopeful. The next seminar takes place on **Monday 10 May at 7.30pm** when the Reverend Dr Frances Ward, will speak on 'Fear, Lament and Hope in the Face of the Climate Crisis'.

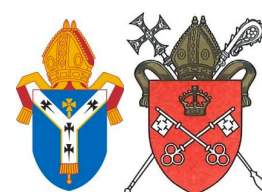


If you would like to attend or find out more please visit <https://engaging-theology-in-cumbria.org/events/do-not-be-afraid-christian-hope-in-todays-world/> and complete the online booking form. You will then be sent a link to join the seminar via Zoom.

PRAYER FOR THE NATION

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/call-prayer-nation>

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York continue to encourage us to join in praying each day at **6.00pm** as we continue to navigate our way through this time of pandemic. Please see some prompts for this time of prayer below.



*'We write to you then in consolation, but also in encouragement, and ultimately in the hope of Jesus Christ. The God who comes to us in Jesus knew grief and suffering himself. On the cross, Jesus shares the weight of our sadness. We therefore encourage everyone who is feeling scared, or lost or isolated to cast their fears on God... **One thing we can all do is pray. More than ever, this is a time when we need to love each other. Prayer is an expression of love.***

Prayer for the Nation

Everyday at 6.00pm

The suggested prayer intentions for each day are:

Sunday – family, friends, and loved ones.

We lift to God those we hold in our hearts – praying for their health, their well-being and their sense of hope.

We pray that even when loved ones cannot physically be together they would not feel apart.

We ask for God's help in our communicating, our connecting and our caring.

Monday – schools and colleges, children, and young people.

We pray for all those involved in the shaping of young lives.

We give God thanks for the sacrifice and commitment of teachers and all those involved in serving children and young people in education.

We pray that all might be nurtured and cared for and that every needful resource would be made available – that all lives can flourish even in these difficult times and that no-one would be overlooked.

Tuesday – the elderly, those who are isolated and the vulnerable.

We echo God's commitment to those most at risk of this virus by praying today for those who are particularly vulnerable and isolated: praying for their deliverance, protection and comfort.

We hold before God those who care for them – that they would be strengthened and encouraged in this work.

Wednesday – businesses, workplaces, and economic wellbeing.

In this time of great challenge, we pray for the economic wellbeing of the country.

We remember before God those who face great uncertainty in their work.

We lift before God those who have lost their jobs and face an uncertain and difficult future.

We pray for a renewed commitment to our common life together.

Thursday – the NHS and all key workers.

Our God is the great healer – and the agent used more than any other is the National Health Service.

Today we voice our gratitude for those who serve this country in the National Health Service and pray for that God would prosper the work of their hands – that they would all be encouraged in their continued work of sacrifice and care amongst us.

Friday – for national and local government.

We pray for those who are in positions of authority with responsibility for decision making at national and local level at this difficult time.

We ask that God would give great wisdom, deep commitment to all and right judgment.

Saturday - all who are grieving, and all those suffering with physical and mental health.

We bring to God all those who suffer in body, mind, spirit or with grief.

We ask that in God's great loving kindness they might know God's sustaining presence amidst their pain.

We pray for those who are stretched beyond their own capacity to cope and remain hopeful – that in the roar of these waterfalls God would bring a sense of coherence, comfort and strength.



**Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing away: God never changes.
Patience obtains all things.
Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices.**

— St Teresa of Avila —

**O Blessed Jesus,
give me stillness of soul in you.
Let your mighty calmness reign in me.
Rule me, O King of Gentleness,
King of Peace.**

— St. John of the Cross —

