

WORSHIP AT HOME – EASTER SIX – 9TH MAY 2021 – THE SPIRIT BESIDE US

Dear Friends,

This week our readings take us from Paul speaking to the Athenians of an unknown God who is made known in Jesus and his resurrection. John develops this further, in the promise of the Spirit who draws Jesus' followers into the love that lies in the heart of God. For Peter, this relationship with the God of Good Friday and Easter is the ground of confidence and blessing in a challenging world. I hope that you find, in your relationship with God, the same confidence, hope and assurance. With every blessing, *Margaret*.

Call to worship: Speak your words of truth to us, gracious God, that we may speak to others.

Show us the work that is to be done, that we may show others.

Move our hearts with compassion, that we may move others.

Challenge us with the message of the Gospel, that we may challenge others.

Nurture us when we doubt or are afraid, that we may nurture others.

Be alongside us day by day, in Jesus' name. **Amen**

In your love we trust, Creator God: your love for your world; your love for each one of us; your love that invites us to love others, to love ourselves and to love you.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, receive our love now, and our thanks. **Amen.**

The words to 'A new commandment' – anonymous. Singing the Faith 242

A new commandment I give unto you: that you love one another as I have loved you,
that you love one another as I have loved you.

By this the world shall know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.

By this the world shall know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.

Prayers: Lord, you make yourself known to us and you are present in our lives even though we do not always recognise or acknowledge you – for all that you are, we thank you, loving God.

You do not leave us orphaned, but embrace us with parental love that encourages and comforts us – for all that you are we thank you, loving God.

You ensure that we are not alone by filling us with your Spirit of truth that inspires and empowers us – for all that you are we thank you, loving God.

Thank you, Father, for your presence, your love and your encouragement. **Amen.**

Gracious God, for all you have done for us, for all your love, mercy and joy – what have we to show to you?
We are too quick to anger – too slow to share grace.

We are too ready to judge – too reluctant to welcome.

Forgive us when we do not proclaim your marvellous deeds. Give us the time we need to mend our ways and revel in your grace.

Here are words we can trust.:

Christ Jesus came and lived among us, revealing the truth of God's love and grace.

Those who had no hope he called by name; to those who had lost their way he said 'Follow me'; to us, who wait on God's mercy he says: 'You are forgiven.'

*Let us learn to forgive ourselves and one another that we might live the gift of God's grace. **Amen.***

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.

Acts 17: 22-31 [NIV]: Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: ‘People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked round and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

Therefore, since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human hands and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.

Meditation of Dionysius the Areopagite:

He spoke with conviction, that man – I’ll give him that – as though he totally believed what he was saying. The arguments may have been weak sometimes – not the same sophistication, the same subtlety, as our own philosophers; and as an orator, to put it bluntly, I’ve heard better.

But he tried, he really tried to get his message home, more than anyone else I’ve ever met. He’d done his homework too, that was clear, speaking to us on our own ground in terms we could understand, language we could relate to immediately. And he wasn’t just playing games, out to prove some academic point or make his mark as a speaker. You could see that he was sincere, desperate to get his message home. One rarely hears that here, you know; here where ideas are two a penny and schools of thought vie together like brawling children, each resolved to win the day.

I’ve sat and listened many times while good and evil, life and death are toyed with in debate like a toddler’s plaything – diverting, rewarding for a time, but then casually put by for another day.

Not Paul though – he talked as one who had to speak of things that burned inside him – and when he spoke of Jesus it was with eyes aflame and face aglow.

I won’t say I’m convinced, not yet at least; I’ll have to hear him further before I go that far. But I am intrigued – eager to find out more – for when he spoke of death and then of life – of Jesus rising from the tomb. He talked as one who knew, as one who’d seen, as one who had no doubts.

Well, if he’s right and Jesus really is alive – if he spoke truth and this man really rose – I want to meet him, see him for myself - not put my trust in another’s faith but root it in my own.

Can it be true? It seems impossible, too good for words. Yet there’s no denying it, despite what his critics may say – he spoke with conviction, that man – with a passion I have rarely heard – and with a passion I should love to share. [**Nick Fawcett – No Ordinary Man**]

The words to ‘Come down, O love divine’ written by Bianco da Siena [d. 1434] and translated by Richard Frederick Littledale [1833-1890] Singing the Faith 372

1 Come down, O Love divine, seek thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

2 O let it freely burn, till earthly passions turn
To dust and ashes, in its heat consuming;
And let thy glorious light shine ever on my sight
And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

3 Let holy charity mine outward vesture be,
And lowliness become mine inner clothing;
True lowliness of heart, which takes the humbler part,
And o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

4 And so the yearning strong, with which the soul will long,
Shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace, till he become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling.

1 Peter 3: 13-22 [NIV]:

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened. But in your hearts revere Christ the Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits – to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. IN it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

John 14: 15-21: [NIV]: *Jesus promises the Holy Spirit.*

If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.

Comment: It wasn't just that the Greek people were hedging their bets by building an altar to the unknown god – it was also part of their spirituality that in all their deities they were seeking to get in touch with the ultimate reality – which actually defies human knowledge. That hit a chord with Paul because he could see how Jesus was not only fulfilling the Judaic law but also all other genuine human attempts to grasp the mysteries of God's truth. They were right for if it weren't for Jesus that essence of ultimate reality would indeed be hidden from us.

Susan Sayers writes: 'What God chose to do through the Incarnation was to draw close to his beloved people in such a way that they could see what the mystery we call God was like, in human terms of reference. That had to include a demonstration of what love means even in the face of total cursing and rejection, and God went ahead and showed that too in the death of Jesus. It had to include a demonstration of how this power of creative life is even stronger than death – which is, in human terms, annihilation and destruction. So God went ahead and did it. It is called the Resurrection.'

In his letter, Peter likens our Baptism into faith, [using the dramatic symbol of drowning and washing] to the way Noah and his family were brought through the destructive flood waters to a new life experience and a fresh start. And we know that we are in that new life by the experience of being alive in Christ.

Now John's Gospel unpacks that for us somewhat. What do people who are living Christ's risen life look like? How would we know if we saw one? How are we to truly live his risen life?

John states Jesus' words with a bluntness which doesn't let us hide behind high-sounding and noble ideals. It is the way we live obediently to the commands of love that sets us apart and proves that we are followers in the way of Christ.

Being well-intentioned but not quite getting round to it is not enough. Excuses won't do – there are no cop-out clauses – no allowable exceptions. This Gospel reading makes it perfectly clear that if we really love, then we will live that love out – not in some sort of fair-weather friendship but in a sacrificial way that may chafe us – may hurt us – and will probably lead us in ways we might not take if we chose for comfort. If there will most probably be sacrifice involved some might ask: then what is the point of making such a choice. What is there in it for us? Jesus promises that, through the gift of the Spirit of Truth, we will become intimate friends with the almighty and merciful God. We will be increasingly honoured with discerning his presence – that will not be just as a memory, nor just a hope for the future, but will be a real experience of the living person who brought us into being, redeemed us - and who will love us for ever.

Meditation – of John the Apostle:

John 14: 18,19. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.

We felt abandoned, bereft – like orphans in a hostile and dangerous world. To see Jesus arrested like that, flogged, crucified, and laid in a tomb – it was like losing a parent, partner and friend all in one, for we had loved him beyond all others, his presence giving meaning to life – a light to our path.

But then he returned, just as he had promised – risen – victorious – yet the same Jesus we'd known before. He walked with us, talked with us – and, for a moment, it was as though nothing had happened. But it *had*, of course, for he had defeated death, vanquished evil – his place no longer with us but with the Father, enthroned on high.

He knew it – *we* knew it – and so it proved, our Lord taken from us again.

But we're not abandoned – not alone – for once more, just as he had promised, he is present among us, his Spirit within, till the end of time. **[Nick Fawcett – Amazing Man Year A]**

Prayer: Dear Lord, we bring into your love those who do not yet know you and your love; those who have turned away from you; those who struggle to accept you and those who refuse to listen. May your love touch them and transform their lives.

Dear Lord, we bring into your love those who need parental love; those who are alone; those who are abused and those who are neglected. May your love touch them and transform their lives.

Dear Lord, we bring into your love those who seek the truth; those who work in the justice systems; those who seek to campaign and advocate on behalf of the voiceless. May your love touch them and transform their lives.

Dear Lord, we bring into your love all those whom we know – those we love, those we like and those we may find more difficult. We know all are precious to you and we ask that your love touch them and transform their lives.

Dear Lord, we bring into your love all who are sick and suffering; all who are facing a terminal diagnosis and those who watch and wait with them; those who are bereaved and ache with their loss.

And we bring all who are facing a crisis of any kind and who find it hard to see a way forward. May your love touch them and transform their lives.

May we show the power and presence of your love in our church, our community and our world – for Jesus' sake. **Amen.**

**The words to 'Listening God, you hear us' written by Marjorie Dobson [b. 1940]. Singing the Faith 524
*This is sung to Noel Nouvelet cf. 'Jesus Christ is waiting' and 'When the green blade rises'***

1 Listening God, you hear us when we cannot speak,
When despair and turmoil leave us faint and weak.
In love you call us back to you again
And your grace reminds us how you feel our pain.

2 Searching God, you find us when we go astray,
As self-centred living takes us from your way.
In love you seek us, show us what we've lost,
And your tears remind us what forgiveness cost.

3 Suffering God, you lift us from our deepest grief,
When emotion blinds us to our own belief.
In love you touch us with your nail-torn hand
And your wounds remind us why you understand.

4 Risen God, you show us love too strong for death,
Evil deeds defeated by your living breath.
In love you teach us never to despair,
Your new life reminds us, hope is always there.

Closing Prayer and Blessing:

May God's blessing be with us as we go forward into the week –

A blessing from the one who calls us together;

A blessing from the one who calls us to care;

A blessing from the one who never deserts us;

A blessing for all in all times and in all places;

A blessing from our gracious God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – now and for all eternity. **Amen.**