

WORSHIP AT HOME FOR 11TH APRIL 2021 – EASTER TWO – EASTER GIFT

Dear Friends,

The year keeps moving on apace and we have reached the second Sunday of Easter when we hear of the transforming impact of the resurrection on the lives of those who follow Jesus. Our God, the God of history and of time and space, wants us to recognise that whatever we may face in life we can always turn to him and that we can worship him as countless faithful have done throughout the ages. We are called to believe so that we may have life in Jesus' name.

God bless.

Margaret

Call to worship: Thomas knelt before the risen Christ and said: 'My Lord and my God.' Through doubt he came to faith – through disbelief he came to know the glory of the risen Christ.

With Thomas we come to worship – just as we are – full of questions and contradictions, offering our faith and our doubts, offering our whole selves.

Like Thomas we long for the presence of Christ in our lives. Like Thomas we acknowledge the mystery of the resurrection – the mystery of Christ present with us now wherever we are.

We say together: 'My Lord and my God' Amen

Lord, the disciples were frightened of the Jewish religious leaders so they locked their doors to keep them out. We have our own fears. Sometimes we are ashamed of them and try to lock them out. Thank you, Lord, that today we can leave our fears and come into the safety of your presence. **Amen**

The words to 'Jesus - the name high over all' written by Charles Wesley [1707-1788] StF 357

1 Jesus – the name high over all, in hell, or earth or sky!

Angels revere, and nations fall, and devils fear and fly.

2 Jesus – the name to sinners dear, the name to sinners given!

It scatters all their guilty fear, it turns their hell to heaven.

3 Jesus – the prisoner's fetters breaks, and bruises Satan's head;

Power into strengthless souls it speaks, and life into the dead.

4 O that the world might taste and see the riches of his grace!

The arms of love that compass me would all the earth embrace.

5 His only righteousness I show, his saving grace proclaim;

'tis all my business here below to cry: 'Behold the Lamb!'

6 Happy if with my latest breath I might but gasp his name;

Preach him to all, and cry in death: 'behold, behold the Lamb!'

Prayer: God of all that is – God of life and love – we praise you.

God of all that is – God of peace and light - we praise you.

In your hand you hold creation - the power of storms – the gentleness of breath.

Through love you set aside that power and became one of us.

Through love you broke the barrier between heaven and earth.

We praise you for your life with us – for your life in us.

We celebrate the glory of your resurrection.

We praise you, Lord – we praise and thank you in the precious name of your Son. **Amen**

Thomas has long had a reputation as a doubter. What is my reputation, Lord – for if I'm honest I think that fits me too. Forgive me that sometimes I find it easier to doubt than to believe. Forgive me for the times when, like Thomas, I demand proof. Often all I really need to do is to allow myself the space and time to reflect, and to let you bring your love into my life. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer: 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.

From Exodus Chapters 14 & 15. A version taken from the Children's Bible in 365 Stories [Mary Batchelor]

In his palace in Egypt, the king was having second thoughts. Why *had* he let those Israelite slaves escape? He forgot all about the terrible disaster that had made him send them packing. Now he wondered how he would get his building done without their hard work. He must fetch them all back. He gave orders for his soldiers to get their horses and chariots ready and to set out in search of the Israelites. They would ride fast through the desert and soon track down the huge, straggling crowd with their children and animals, plodding slowly along. Then they could round them all up and bring them back to Egypt.

The Israelites were busy setting up their camp near the Sea of Reeds. In front of them lay the waters of the lake and all around them stretched the bare, uninviting desert. Suddenly the bustle of the camp was interrupted by shouts of alarm. Someone had spotted a dust-cloud on the distant horizon and soon the watchers were able to see the shape of the dreaded war-chariots of Egypt coming nearer by the minute. A great wave of fear and panic swept through the camp. The people swarmed around Moses and wailed: 'Why didn't you leave us in Egypt instead of bringing us into this horrible desert to be killed? It's all your fault!'

'Don't be frightened,' Moses said. 'keep calm and be quiet. God can save us from the Egyptians.'

But the Egyptians were coming steadily nearer. The only way of escape was straight ahead – and ahead lay the waters of the Sea of Reeds. They were trapped!

Then God spoke to Moses: 'Tell the people not to panic but to start marching forward. I am going to rescue my people and show the Egyptians that I am God. All you must do is to hold up your stick over the water. Then wait to see what will happen.'

Moses did just as God had told him. He lifted his stick high over the Sea of Reeds. A strong east wind began to blow. It whipped up the waters of the lake into a bank on either side, leaving a clear pathway through the sea. At the same time, God's guiding cloud moved from in front of the Israelites to behind them so that it blocked them from the view of the oncoming Egyptians. As night fell, the cloud's fiery glow gave light to guide the Israelites across the lake.

Quickly the people gathered together their children and flocks and began to file across the path through the sea. All night they marched steadily across. By this time, the Egyptian horses and chariots were almost on their heels. They began to crash recklessly after the lost slaves, but the wheels of their chariots soon clogged and stuck in the mud at the bottom of the lake. The drivers urged on their horses but in vain. The wheels only skidded and spun.

As morning dawned the last of the Israelites had safely reached the other side of the sea.

'Hold your stick out over the water again,' God told Moses. As he did so the water came flowing back. All of the Egyptian forces were lost. 'You will never see them again,' Moses promised the people.

There was a great shout of happiness and relief. God had saved them!

Moses burst out singing: 'I will sing to the Lord because he has won a glorious victory; he has thrown the horses and their riders into the sea. The Lord is my strong defender; he is the one who has saved me.'

Then Miriam, Moses' sister, took up her tambourine and played and sang too: 'Sing to the Lord, because he has won a glorious victory.' Everyone joined in, singing and dancing in praise to God who had saved them from the Egyptians for ever.

Comment: Both of our readings today will concern doubting – people are often very good at that. They seem to be able to move with effortless ease from the utmost certainty to the utmost doubt in moments. As we look at this reading from Exodus we need to remember what has already happened. Israelites and

Egyptians have both seen the terrible plagues that came upon the land and they have both – after some time – realised the connection between the plagues and the enslavement of the Israelites. Pharaoh has finally let the slaves go and they have moved off, accompanied day and night by the physical sign of God's presence in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Yet suddenly Pharaoh changes his mind, forgets all that has happened, and sets out in pursuit of his erstwhile slaves. They, in turn, forget all that God has done for them and panic.

Jane Williams [Christian author and lecturer] says: 'What follows reads like God spelling things out in CAPITAL LETTERS. 'Look, you lot,' he seems to say, with affectionate exasperation, as he makes a path through the waves of the sea, 'try to pay attention and remember this for three seconds.' He goes to exaggerated lengths to make it clear to the dimwits – Egyptians, churned up and drowned in the raging torrent; Israelites feet not even wet. Got it?'

Well, for the time being at least they got the message and 'feared the Lord and believed in the Lord.' But it doesn't last long.

We will see a similar pattern of doubt in our Gospel passage.

John 20: 19-31. [The Living Bible paraphrased]:

That evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors, in fear of the Jewish leaders, when suddenly Jesus was standing there among them! After greeting them he showed them his hands and side. How wonderful was their joy when they saw their Lord! He spoke to them again and said, 'As the Father has sent me, even so am I sending you.' Then he breathed on them and told them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you refuse to forgive them, they are unforgiven.'

One of the disciples, Thomas 'the Twin' was not there at the time with the others. When they kept telling him, 'We have seen the Lord,' he replied, 'I will not believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands – and put my fingers into them – and place my hand into his side.'

Eight days later the disciples were together again and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them and greeting them. Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger into my hands. Put your hand into my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!' 'My Lord and my God!' Thomas said.

Then Jesus told him, 'You believe because you have seen me. But blessed are those who have not seen me and believe anyway.'

Jesus' disciples saw him do many other miracles besides the ones told about in this book, but these are recorded so that you will believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing in him you will have life.

Comment: As in the Exodus reading, we need to remember what has gone before. The disciples have seen the power of Jesus, teaching, healing, even raising the dead. They have heard from Mary Magdalene about the resurrection – but they are still sitting huddled behind locked doors, frightened and self-pitying.

'Again', Jane Williams writes, 'God responds with patient humour and a demonstration which should satisfy even the most hardened doubter.'

Jesus appears in the locked room. Jesus – whom the disciples had last seen dying in agony. He was clearly the same man – he makes a point of showing them his wounds. He also breathes on them just in case they might think that he isn't real but some kind of ghost.

Jane Williams: 'If the disciples had been able to imagine a conversation with Jesus after his crucifixion, how would it have gone? 'Where were you when I needed you?' perhaps? Or even 'Didn't you listen to a word I was saying all those years?' But there is no mention of the past here. Instead, those who had earned judgement are given the task of judging others – those who had doubted God's power and his promises are given the living presence of God in the Holy Spirit.' But even that is not enough for Thomas chooses not

to believe the combined witness of his friends, remaining unconvinced not only by their words but also by their sudden transformation from defeat and despair to a glowing joy. It is, then, just for Thomas that Jesus comes again in his full, unmistakable, physical presence – here is the risen and crucified Lord standing in front of him – asking Thomas if he is satisfied now and could he become Convinced Thomas rather than Doubting Thomas? – and pointing out to him that he had seen and so believed but for those who followed they would believe without the physical presence - they would be blessed indeed.

Prayer of Reflection: Today is another day on our journey together as pilgrims of God. Each of us needs support, whether old or young, new to faith or a long-time believer – for the journey will at times be hard. There may be times when we are like the disciples, frightened and living behind locked doors. There may be things that we find difficult to do on our own and we need the help of others. There may be times when we can't find God in our lives and we need others to help show us that God is always with us. There may be times when we can't pray and we need others to pray for us. There may be times when we don't know where to go on our journey and we need others who will help to show us the way. There will be times when we can pray together – there will be times when we can learn together – there will be times when we can worship together. There will be times when the Spirit comes – and we will come home rejoicing.

The words to 'Jesus stand among us' written by William Pennefather [1816-1873] Hymns and Psalms 530

1 Jesus stand among us in thy risen power;
Let this time of worship be a hallowed hour.

2 Breathe the Holy Spirit into every heart,
Bid the fears and sorrows from each soul depart.

3 Thus with quickened footsteps we'll pursue our way,
Watching for the dawning of eternal day.

Prayer: Lord, we live today in a troubled world where no-one leaves their doors open any more – where we feel we have to lock up everything that is of value to us – where we are too afraid to use our possessions for fear of damaging them, or having others spoil them. *But you said, 'As the Father sent me, so I send you.'* **May I be the answer to someone's prayer today.**

Lord, it's not only things that get damaged but also people – in so many ways. We pray for people whose lives are limited through ill health – for those who find it difficult to believe there is a way out of their suffering. *As the Father sent me, so I send you.* **May I be the answer to someone's prayer today.**

We pray for those locked into themselves through mental illness that they will receive the treatment and the understanding they need. We pray for wisdom for those who care for them. *As the Father sent me, so I send you.* **May I be the answer to someone's prayer today.**

We pray for all those who have to lock their doors to dwell in safety – for those who live in fear of war or natural disaster – for those who suffer abuse behind locked doors. *As the father has sent me, so I send you.* **May I be the answer to someone's prayer today.**

We pray for prisoners – for those who have to be locked in for their own safety and the safety of others – for those who seek to bring your light into their lives. *As the Father sent me, so I send you.* **May I be the answer to someone's prayer today.**

We pray for safe moving into a more normal life after we have all spent time in lockdown. It has been a difficult time and we cherish the thought of regaining a freer life – may we use that understanding so that we become more caring and compassionate towards those who are 'locked down' in any way – physically, mentally, spiritually. *As the Father sent me, so I send you.* **May I be the answer to someone's prayer today.** We ask these prayers in the precious name of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Illustration: [David Adam]: When he was a young man Anthony Bloom, who later became an Archbishop, was an atheist. But he was also a seeker. He heard a lecture on Jesus and just could not believe what he heard. He picked up a Bible and turned to the Gospels. He counted the chapters of each Gospel so that he could read the shortest. He chose St. Mark and this is what he said:

I started to read St Mark's Gospel..... before I reached the third chapter I suddenly became aware that on the other side of my desk there was a presence. And the certainty was so strong that it was Christ standing there that it has never left me. This was the real turning point. Because Christ was alive and I had been in his Presence.

Meditation on John 20: 19-20. Andrew speaks. [Nick Fawcett]

We have seen Jesus! No, don't laugh for we have seen him, I tell you!

We made the mistake of dismissing it ourselves, scoffing when the women came back wild-eyed with excitement. 'Pull yourselves together!' we told them, 'Calm down!'

We couldn't believe he was alive, refused to accept it could possibly be true. And when they admitted they couldn't be certain, that they'd only seen the empty tomb rather than Jesus himself, then we looked for some simpler explanation – an answer with more common sense.

Even when Mary returned, tears of joy in her eyes – even when the two from Emmaus spoke of having seen him, we wouldn't accept it, certain that we knew best. It's understandable, I suppose, I mean you'd think twice, wouldn't you, if you'd seen your best friend murdered, sealed in the tomb – only to be told he'd been spotted down the street? And anyway we didn't want to build our hopes up. We were still reeling from the shock, the horror, the sorrow of it all. Yet if I'm honest there's more to it than that, for most of all our pride was hurt. If he was alive, we reasoned, then why hadn't we seen him? Why should Mary, or those two disciples, or anyone else come to that, have seen him before we did? We were his chosen disciples – we the ones who'd given everything up to follow him – we those who had taken all the risks – so if he had risen surely we would have known? It's awful, I know, but that's the way we saw it until he finally appeared to us. We should have remembered, of course, what he'd said so often, how the first will be last – the least greatest; but we still had much to learn and were too full of ourselves by half. Anyway, there we were, huddled together in that upstairs room arguing about what it all meant, when there he was, standing among us arms outstretched in welcome. Where he came from or where he went after I've no idea. I only know it was him – Jesus – and that he was alive – wonderfully, amazingly, gloriously alive!

The words to 'I know that my Redeemer lives' written by Samuel Medley [1738-1799] StF 303

1 I know that my Redeemer lives – what joy the blest assurance gives!

He lives, he lives, who once was dead; he lives, my everlasting Head!

2 He lives, to bless me with his love; he lives, to plead for me above;

He lives, my hungry soul to feed; he lives, to help in time of need.

3 He lives, and grants me daily breath; he lives, and I shall conquer death;

He lives, my mansion to prepare; he lives, to lead me safely there.

4 He lives, all glory to his name; he lives, my Saviour, just the same;

What joy the blest assurance gives, I know that my Redeemer lives!

Closing Prayer: Go into the week ahead – share your wounds and believe in your dreams. Go, proclaim Jesus as your Lord and your God. Go, bring peace and be agents of renewal. God, and be Christ's disciples in the world today wherever you are in all the communities to which you belong.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us and all whom we love this day and for ever more. Amen