

WORSHIP AT HOME – 2ND MAY 2021 – EASTER 6 – ‘I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE’

Dear Friends, In our worship this week there is a theme of being joined to God in the close bond of an unbreakable relationship. Stephen sees heaven opened and prays as he dies. 1 Peter speaks about believers being built together like living stones, and in John’s Gospel, Jesus assures his disciples that he is the way for them and that they will be united with him. In every case this bond is to overflow in prayer, worship and service to benefit others. I hope that life is treating you kindly and that you find that faith is indeed the underpinning of that life. I look forward to seeing you again in person as we gradually – and sensibly – edge back to normality. God bless, *Margaret*.

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Call to Worship: Jesus said, ‘I am the Way – come!’
 Jesus said, ‘I am the Way and the Truth – come and receive.’
 Jesus said, ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life – come, receive and respond.’

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 for it is in Jesus’ name we pray. **Amen.**

The words to ‘I heard the voice of Jesus say’ written by Horatius N. Bonar [1808-1889] StF 248

1 I heard the voice of Jesus say: ‘Come unto me and rest;
Lay down, O weary one, lay down, your head upon my breast.
I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad,
I found in him a resting place, and he has made me glad.
 2 I heard the voice of Jesus say: ‘Behold, I freely give
 The living water; thirsty one, stoop down and drink and live.’
 I came to Jesus, and I drank of that life-giving stream;
 My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in him.
3 I heard the voice of Jesus say: ‘I am this dark world’s Light;
Look unto me, your moon shall rise, and all your day be bright.’
I looked to Jesus, and I found in him my star, my sun;
And in that light of life I’ll walk, till travelling days are done.

Prayers: Gracious God, you are the rock of our lives. Your strength sustains us. Your power delivers us. Your mercy brings forgiveness to us.
We come to you in adoration, praising and thanking you that our whole life is in your hands – held, sustained, protected.
Glory be to you, merciful Lord, glory, honour, majesty and worship, in the name of your Son, our redeemer.
Amen.

Merciful God, by your calling we are made holy, yet we know that we do not live up to this holy calling. Forgive us our harsh words and thoughtless acts – forgive us our forgetfulness and pride – forgive us our short-sightedness and so failure to act.
Forgive us and have mercy on us.

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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 life 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 forever and ever. Amen.

Acts 7: 55-60 [New International Version]:

Verses 2-53 – Stephen spoke to the Sanhedrin and proclaimed the gospel.

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'

At this they covered their ears, and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees, and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

About Stephen [NIV Study Bible]:

Around the world, the gospel has most often taken root in places prepared by the blood of martyrs. Before people can give their lives to the gospel, however, they must first live their lives for the gospel. One way God trains his servants is to place them in insignificant positions. Their desire to serve Christ is then translated into the reality of serving others. Stephen was an effective administrator and messenger before becoming a martyr.

Stephen was named among the managers of food distribution in the early Church. Long before violent persecution broke out, there was already social ostracism. Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah were usually cut off from their families. As a result, the believers depended on each other for support. The sharing of homes, food and resources was both a practical and necessary mark of the early Church. Eventually the number of believers made it necessary to organise the sharing. People were being overlooked. There were complaints. Those chosen to help manage were chosen for their integrity, wisdom and sensitivity to God.

Stephen, besides being a good administrator, was also a powerful speaker. When confronted in the Temple by various antagonistic groups, Stephen's logic in responding was convincing. This is clear from the defence he made before the Council. He presented a summary of the Jews' own history and made powerful applications that stung his listeners. During his defence, Stephen must have known he was speaking his own death sentence. Members of the Council could not stand to have their evil motives exposed. They stoned him to death while he prayed for their forgiveness. His final words show how much he had become like Jesus in a short time. His death had a lasting impact on young Saul [Paul] of Tarsus who would move from being a violent persecutor of Christians to being one of the greatest champions of the gospel the Church has known.

Stephen's life is a continual challenge to all Christians. Because he was the first to die for the faith, his sacrifice raises questions – how many risks do we take in being Jesus' followers? Would we be willing to die for him? Are we willing to *live* for him?

Lessons from Stephen's life:

Striving for excellence in small assignments prepares one for greater responsibilities.

Real understanding of God always leads to practical and compassionate actions towards people.

Known for his spiritual qualities of faith, wisdom, grace and power – and for the Spirit's presence in his life.

The words to 'The head that once was crowned with thorns' by Thomas Kelly [1769-1855] StF 312

1 The head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now;

A royal diadem adorns the mighty Victor's brow.

2 The highest place that heaven affords is his, is his by right,

The King of kings and Lord of lords, and heaven's eternal light.

3 The joy of all who dwell above, the joy of all below

To whom he manifests his love and grants his name to know.

4 To them the cross, with all its shame, with all its grace, is given,

Their name an everlasting name, their joy the joy of heaven.

5 They suffer with their God below, they reign with him above,

Their profit and their joy to know the mystery of his love.

6 The cross he bore is life and health, though shame and death to him;

His people's hope, his people's wealth their everlasting theme.

1 Peter: 2: 2-10 – headed: The Living Stone and a Chosen people.

As you come to him, the living Stone, - rejected by men, but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:

'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'

Now, to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe:

'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.'

and

'A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

John 14: 1-14 – Jesus comforts his disciples:

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place I am going.'

Jesus the Way to the Father: Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?'

Jesus answered: 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.'

Philip said: 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.'

Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I am doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

Comment:

As we know, rocks are solid so they are very strong as foundations – but exceedingly painful and obstinate to kick! This makes the rocky image which we find in that letter from Peter [whose nickname was 'the rock'] such a splendid one for helping us to visualise the utter faithfulness and solid assurance of Jesus. Being built up on such a solid foundation would have been an exciting prospect for the early Christians as they faced persecution.

We are shown that the building depends on those living stones in every generation – now just as much as then – and that each one adds to the great living temple of worship and praise. Like stones we are to be strong in our faith – and that faith is not just existing but fully and dynamically alive. As Susan Sayers in her Sermon Illustrations writes: 'What a Church it can be when it is firmly set on the foundation of Christ and built through his power alone with the offered lives and gifts and sufferings and struggles of millions and millions of ordinary human beings!'

Today we have read some wonderful examples of Jesus as a living stone which should excite and inspire us. When we read of the young man, Stephen, standing gazing into heaven while stones of hatred, misunderstanding, misplaced zeal and righteous indignation are hurled at him, we can see just how his faith anchors him securely even then, as he was being cruelly put to death. His loving forgiveness of his enemies proclaims the reality of his faith. It stood the worst testing – and it held firm.

As we look at that action we probably ask ourselves: how does he do it? Possibly we might not feel so much inspired as dampened. Seeing people who have such great faith while we are trying to muddle along through life can make us feel woefully inadequate in the way we ourselves witness to Christ.

We might feel we have more in common with Philip as he tries so hard to understand what Jesus is saying [John 14:8] – he was thinking from a completely different stance and unable to put the signs and clues together meaningfully. It took the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for things to suddenly start to make sense to the disciples – and that is still true for us today

It is in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection that we grasp that he really is the Way, the Truth and the Life. It is in believing in this Jesus who gave up his life in total self-giving love, and 'lived out for us in human terms the loving nature of almighty God that we can die to sin and be brought into a new life relationship with God which is valid both in time and eternity'. [Sayers] The Way is not a code of behaviour but a relationship with God through Christ – absolutely basic to our human experience and need.

Jesus offers us a personal relationship and hopes we will accept it – the relationship will never end but get deeper and more satisfying – and it will continue to get ever deeper and strengthening us in our faith, throughout our entire life.

Prayer: Lord, we pray: In a world where is warfare and violence, many people live in fear of the bullet and the bomb; many have had their lives and livelihoods destroyed; many grieve for those who have been killed. In a world where harvests have failed; where there have been droughts and floods; where many do not have the money to pay for food and power and many are reaching the end of their tether. In a world where many are alone; many do not know where to look for comfort and encouragement and many see no purpose or future; some cannot see the purpose of anything.

In our lives when we struggle and doubt – when we don't know what to say or do; when life overwhelms us and we turn to you, loving God be for us, and for all for whom we pray, a rock and a stronghold that we may know your strength and peace. **Amen**

Meditation: from Philip, one of the disciples:

'Show us the Father,' I asked. Can you believe that? After three years of following Jesus – three years of walking by his side, still I could come up with a daft line like that! It makes me cringe now to think of it, but at the time, despite all he'd said, it seemed perfectly sensible – the most natural request in the world. I was coming at things the wrong way, you see, wanting all my questions answered – as though I could understand everything about God, all there is to know down to the very last detail. And I had no need – that's the stupid thing – for I had seen him already, there by my side in Jesus. In his words, his deeds, his love, his mercy, God was present – like Father, like Son, the word made flesh. But I couldn't see for looking, the wood obscured by the trees. Learn from my mistake as you search eagerly for God yet never find. We'll never understand *everything* – not in this life, not until we see him face to face, but in Jesus we've seen enough – and more than enough; all we need to know. {**Nick Fawcett – An Amazing Man Year A**}

The words to 'Jesus Christ is waiting' written by John L. Bell [b. 1949] and Graham Maule [b. 1958].

Singing the Faith: 251 [this is sung to Noel Nouvelet cf: 'Now the green blade rises']

1 Jesus Christ is waiting, waiting in the streets:
No one is his neighbour, all alone he eats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I am lonely too:
Make me, friend or stranger, fit to wait on you.

2 Jesus Christ is raging, raging in the streets,
Where injustice spirals, and real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I am angry too:
In the Kingdom's causes, let me rage with you.

3 Jesus Christ is healing, healing in the streets,
Curing those who suffer, touching those he greets.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I have pity too;
Let my care be active, healing, just like you.

4 Jesus Christ is dancing, dancing in the streets,
Where each sign of hatred he, with love, defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I should triumph too:
Where good conquers evil, let me dance with you.

5 Jesus Christ is calling, calling in the streets,
'Who will join my journey? I will guide their feet.
Listen, Lord Jesus, let my fears be few;
Walk one step before me: I will follow you.

Closing Prayer and Blessing:

May God's blessing be with us as we go on 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 life and all times and all places;

A blessing from our gracious God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us and all for whom we pray, now and for ever more. **Amen**