

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – April 19 2020 ('Easter 2')

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This is an edition prepared for the first Sunday after Easter.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript.

In the season of Easter we continue to praise God for the resurrection of his Son:

Call to Worship

Here are words from the First Letter of Peter (1.3-5)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Musicⁱ – *Alleluia* from the album *There is one among us* by the Wild Goose Worship group of the Iona Community.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Confession

Almighty God, we continue to bless and praise you for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ, for his teaching during his earthly life, for his sacrifice that first Easter, and for his inspiration now, channeled through the Holy Spirit, the Helper he promised and through which he is with us always, until the end of time.

Though we are scattered, help us to gather together spiritually in one place, still a church despite our isolated condition.

Your Old Testament people knew the promise of your redemption; we have seen it. The disciples of Jesus still doubted the reality of what they experienced; we have two millennia of hindsight to see its effects. They had only word of mouth and slowly circulated letters to spread the Gospel; we have twenty-first century technology that can link the whole globe to the Good News.

Help us as we turn our thoughts from pandemic and lockdown to you and your goodness and love. Love so great that you allowed your Son, even sent your Son, to die and amazingly reconcile your Creation to yourself, once and for everyone.

Forgive us when our response is lukewarm, when our vision turns inward to our own discomforts, when you call and our reaction is to hide. Help us not just to rely on your forgiveness but to build on it, to find new and effective ways to share what we know and what you give.

In Jesus' name we ask this, and in his words we pray together once again...

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 them that 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.

Scripture: Psalm 42 (A responsive version from Iona Abbey Worship Book)

As a deer longs for streams of cool water,
so my heart longs for you, O God.

*I thirst for you, the living God.
When shall I know you are near me?*

Tears have been my food, day and night,
while tormenters ask, 'Where is your God?'

*My heart breaks whenever I remember
how I once went with others to God's house.*

I would lead the joyful procession,
singing and shouting God's praise.

**Why am I sunk in deep misery?
Why am I lost and distressed?
I shall put my hope in God,
in the One who is my deliverer.**

My soul is troubled within me
therefore I will remember you.

*Deep calls to deep in confusion
And all your waters sweep over me.*

Yet by day God's love assures me;
come night, a song leaves my lips,
a prayer to the God of my life.

*I ask God, 'Why have you forgotten me?'
Why should I walk like a mourner,
Being taunted, 'Where is your God?'*

**Why am I sunk in deep misery?
Why am I lost and distressed?
I shall put my hope in God,
in the One who is my deliverer.**

All will know that within the book of Psalms you can find a variety of material encompassing praise but also laments, and some which express a confidence in God in good times and in bad. In so far as it was 'compiled', how wise to have this mix.

For in every phase of human history there will have been cause to deploy all of those.

The laments and expressions of patience, waiting on God, are relevant today. Last weekend, Easter weekend I was struck by how appropriate it was to have in mind Psalm 42 – which has the worshipper, the author of the Psalm, recalling how things used to be: Here, from another translation, verse 4:

*These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.*

The writer is cut off. This wasn't written in a time of national exile, and it is assumed the author is somehow travelling or on campaign or in some other way geographically distant from the centre of his religion. But this psalm would have been part of the spiritual armoury of **anyone** who was unable to follow his preferred routine of worship. That's us. Whether you'd like to attend church twice on Sundays or if you would usually only turn out for major festivals, the churches can not be accessed just now.

And yet... And yet the Church – you can't hear the capital C. And yet the Church is still there. It is still worshipping – that's what you and I are doing just now. It – we – are still in touch with God, because even if our place of worship is remote, God is all around. And just as new ways to worship are being sought every day, so the opportunity to praise God in **your** preferred way and place will one day return.

*Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.*

For a minute of calm, listen to this short piece that we used in one of our Holy Week podcasts.

Music – *Cora*, music by Randy Edelman from the soundtrack of *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: John 20.19-31

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Reflection

"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

I feel sorry for Thomas, He is remembered as "Doubting Thomas", and no doubt always will be, not because he was for ever doubting things, but because of this particular passage that we have read, because he happened not to be around at the right moment. He had faith - in the end. He believed - in the end. But at first he had doubts.

On the evening of the first Easter Day, the other disciples were gathered together behind closed doors, fearful of the Jews, Not confident enough to venture out into the streets in case they came to the same end as Jesus himself. And this way that the other ten disciples were hiding away in a locked room straight away makes Thomas' doubting less blameworthy for me.

Ask yourself how you would have behaved in the same circumstances. The disciples had already had news from Mary Magdalene that the Lord had risen from the dead. We read about it in John 20,18 - she had seen the Lord, he had spoken to her in the garden. But still the disciples were living in fear. Read again in Chapter 20, verses 19 and 20: *Jesus came and stood among them and said 'peace be with you'. When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.*

The disciples then told Thomas, as Magdalene had told them - We have seen the Lord. And he wanted to see for himself - should we be surprised? I don't think it was just Thomas that had trouble believing. Despite the miracles they had all seen as they went around the country with Jesus, they all saw the arrest and execution of Jesus as THE END. "He saved others, himself he can not save" – you remember the jeering crowd at the foot of the cross. This must have been the thought of the disciples too.

Everyone has doubts - Jesus didn't say Blessed are those who believe (snap the fingers) just like that. or Blessed are those who have... an unthinking faith. Faith isn't easy, and Jesus acknowledged this - Blessed are those who have not seen - who don't have the evidence of their own eyes to set beside the other evidence they can pick up from other Christians, from the Bible, from their hearts - and yet believe.

There is nothing wrong with doubt - so long as it is overcome in the end. I remember, in mathematics lessons at school, nodding with the rest of the class to agree that I understood the techniques of "differential equations". To be honest, they were a mystery - I was only doing it to give myself a quiet life, and this must have showed in homework and classroom tests. When the penny finally did drop, and I suddenly grasped the secret behind the whole thing - what a difference! And of course what I should have done is agreed to the teacher going through the original work until I was sure of it, expressed my doubts at the beginning, not limped through, groping in the dark. If you admit to your doubts, they can be dealt with. If you hide them, you may be fooling other people, and may be fooling yourself, but where is the lasting good?

So what has Thomas given us, what has he shown us? He has given us an example of honest doubt with which we can identify, and which reminds us, even if we are confident in our faith, that others may be less than confident in theirs.

And perhaps given us a push to realise that we are striving, after all, not to be like Thomas the doubter, but like Jesus who took away that doubt, and can still do so today.

Prayers of Intercession

We pray...

Lord God, you know what is on our minds. You know what worries us, what scares us. You know the illness that not just threatens but has already changed our way of life.

We thank and praise you for all the people who are keeping us supplied, keeping us in touch and most of all working to care for the sick and plan how to manage the course of the pandemic. Give to all of them a sense of purpose, inspiration to do what is right, courage... and strength.

At a time when other needs within our community and our world might be neglected, we pray for those who do not have adequate housing, food and drink, those who do not have a home to self-isolate in or whose homes are unsafe.

We pray for those in Africa still at risk from locust swarms, those in conflict zones, those suffering from drought or flood.

And we pray for those who have been bereaved in a time when their response and grief has to be constrained and managed in line with every other aspect of life.

Grant us all your peace as we try to share your love, and the ever true Good News of the resurrection of your Son.

In his name we pray
Amen

Hymn *Praise to the Holiest in the height* The St Michael's Singers, *Easter Hymns*

*Praise to the Holiest in the height,
and in the depth be praise;
in all his words most wonderful,
most sure in all his ways!*

*O loving wisdom of our God!
when all was sin and shame,
a second Adam to the fight
and to the rescue came.*

*O wisest love! that flesh and blood,
which did in Adam fail,
should strive afresh against the foe,
should strive, and should prevail;*

*And that a higher gift than grace
should flesh and blood refine:
God's presence and his very self,
and essence all-divine.*

*O generous love! that he who smote
in man for man the foe,
the double agony in man
for man should undergo:*

*And in the garden secretly,
and on the cross on high,
should teach his brethren, and inspire
to suffer and to die.*

*Praise to the Holiest in the height,
and in the depth be praise;
in all his words most wonderful,
most sure in all his ways!*

Words: J.H. Newman (1801-1890)

Blessing

May God's love surround us, His Son inspire us and the Spirit guide and strengthen us as we continue to serve him in this difficult time.

And may the blessing of God Almighty; Father Son and Holy Spirit be with us and those we love today and for ever.

Amen

Closing Music: *I know that my Redeemer liveth* Handel, *Messiah*
Judith Nelson; Academy of Ancient Music, Christopher Hogwood

ⁱ All music included in this podcast is made available for download under the terms of the PRS for Music Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067

ⁱⁱ Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition.