

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – May 24 2020 ('Easter 7')

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for 24 May, the Sunday after Ascension Day, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica and Janet for joining in the preparation of this week's edition.

Call to Worship: Psalm 47:

¹ Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.

² For the Lord Most High is awesome,
the great King over all the earth.

³ He subdued nations under us,
peoples under our feet.

⁴ He chose our inheritance for us,
the pride of Jacob, whom he loved.

⁵ God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.

⁶ Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.

⁷ For God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise.

⁸ God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on his holy throne.

⁹ The nobles of the nations assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,

for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted.

You may be used to us playing some quiet music as we prepare to bring our worship to God in prayer. But it's Ascensontide, so all of the quiet stuff can go out of the window! As the psalmist writes, *God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets*. Here's the sound of a trumpet as we celebrate the kingly nature as well as the infinite and eternal love of God.

Musicⁱ – "Trumpet Voluntary" by Jeremiah Clarke (c1673-1707)
Barry Wordsworth, BBC Concert Orchestra, cond. Robert Ferriman

That was Jeremiah Clarke's Trumpet Voluntary – remember the composer as we will hear more of his music later.

Prayers

We offer our time of worship to God in our prayers...

Lord, it is a Bank Holiday weekend. But few have gone away for any kind of break, and those that have will risk disapproval from those who see them go and a cold welcome from those who see them arrive. The lockdown is barely relaxed and far from being lifted. Once again we pray for patience for all, tolerance of measures imposed on us and a sense of working together to combat this global ill.

At Ascensontide we join with the disciples in waiting for the promised Holy Spirit. But **we** wait, knowing how it came at Pentecost, knowing the difference it made to ordinary people, and knowing the amazing achievements of those inspired through two millennia to be the body of Christ.

Lord be with us in our waiting, in our reflecting on your nature, your relationship with your Son and your relationship with your creation. Be with us in our worship now and always.

May we respond to your love with love for others.

May we respond to the commission of Christ with dedication and purpose.

May we respond to your forgiveness with true resolve that we will leave our shortcomings behind and go forward - selflessly and singlemindedly seeking your will for the earth, for the Church and for each one of us as individuals.

We offer these prayers in the name of our glorified and ascended saviour, Jesus Christ.

And we blend all of our resolve, response and purpose together in the words that he taught us:

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.

Listen for the Word of God as Janet brings us a reading from Luke's Gospel.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Luke 24.44-53

⁴⁴ He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.'

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶

He told them, 'This is what is written: the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Reflection (1)

Luke put both of his books, the Gospel that bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles, in the form of a communication to someone called Theophilus.

Was this Theophilus a real man? If so, was it his real name? This is a Greek name that with even a little knowledge of the language one can work out – it means either ‘Friend of God’ or ‘One who loves God’. It was a name that could be given to any member of the early Church and some have speculated Luke was using this device to address the whole of the Church community. There are a number of people of this name who were around in the decades immediately after Jesus – Jewish priests of the next generations after Caiaphas and Annas who could have been enquirers after truth and open to hearing an organised account of the life of Jesus.

Whatever the answer, the message has indeed been passed down to every member of the Church, and is indeed still available to those all over the world who would identify as ‘friends of God’.

I have chosen this year, in my worship for the Sunday after Ascension Day, to pick up the Ascension readings. Luke repeats himself – almost – as you will hear when Janet reads a different version of the same story from Acts in a few minutes. The versions differ though they are not dreadfully inconsistent. But there is not the same detailed description of meeting and teaching the disciples after the Resurrection that we have in John’s Gospel.

No matter. For what is important here and what I am emphasising today is what this passage – what these passages – say about God.

Just occasionally, when I am sitting (or used to sit) in church facing the front for a change, I would get to a point perhaps ten minutes into a sermon and think to myself, ‘now isn’t it time the preacher said something about God?’ I am happy to say that this was usually when, going back some time, I was responsible for assessing the progress of local preachers in training. Sometimes it was more experienced and even ordained preachers who had concentrated on a subject of current concern to such an extent that it took a while to come back to what this meant for our worship, praise, relationship with God and our calling to represent and share his love in the world. I will not claim it has never happened to me. But it is **never** a bad idea to consider any act of worship in that light, and if we end up saying nothing about God then we have not worshipped.

Here at the end of the earthly presence of the physical, human Christ we have a glorious affirmation about the nature of God, about his relationship with his Son. Someone had appeared in Galilee preaching and teaching and working miracles. Remarkable. He said he was the Son of God, despite growing up among village people, in the household of a tradesman. Astonishing. He gathered a group of followers about him and travelled the country, even venturing into the domain of the religious leaders, confronting them with their hypocrisy and backsliding. Unbelievable. He was eventually cornered through an act of betrayal, condemned after an appeal to the worse nature of the civil authorities and killed. Dramatic and Climactic. I’m running out of adjectives here, but what came next was almost literally beyond belief.

Yet what happened next is the foundation of the belief of the majority of the people who have found their way to revdbill.uk this week. Jesus rose from death and appeared to his disciples. To say 'amazing' doesn't do justice to it.

Luke finishes his first book on a high. Jesus ascends into heaven, moves (somehow) upward and away from the disciples and they understand he has returned to his Father. This brings this chapter, this phase of the story to a conclusion. *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him should not perish but have eternal life.* [John 3.16] And at the end of this part of the story the Son returned to his Father.

It had to happen. And in the light of the Ascension we can look back down the path that led to that day and illuminate all that went before. The light shines forward, too.

Here is some quieter music as we wait to hear more from the writer Luke.

Music: *Mozart, Clarinet Concerto (2nd mvt)* – Emma Johnson,
English Chamber Orchestra, cond. Raymond Leppard

We continue, or possibly repeat Luke's account of the Ascension of Jesus in the opening verses of the book of Acts.

Scripture: Acts 1.1-11

¹ In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

³ After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'

⁶ Then they gathered round him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'

⁷ He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'

Reflection (2)

If the book of the Acts of the Apostles is part two of Luke's story of the early Church – which it is, then one might whimsically refer to this passage as if it was the 'previously in Luke' segment at the beginning of a dramatised version of this on TV. Letting the reader catch up, reminding them of the action, where the story was left.

Fair enough, but it's more than that, of course. The vision of Jesus departing into heaven and the witness of the angels that Jesus will return is the foundation stone on which the rest of the story depends. I spoke earlier about it shining a light backwards and forwards. One name for that light would be **authority**.

You get to the end of the Gospel story I outlined, and then this happens. God's Son, sent from heaven and then resuming his place there, has by his Ascension set a seal of authority on all that has gone before. By this sign you can believe that all that happened, all he did and said and all he promised was done and said and promised in the name of God. Truly. It has been said, it has been done with authority. Now you can be sure.

In John's Gospel, which describes it best, the period after the Resurrection is peppered with questions of Jesus' identity. In the Book of Acts, after the Ascension there is no more mention of doubts and backsliding, betrayal and hesitation. In the very next few verses we see an account of Peter taking charge, organising a ballot to replace Judas Iscariot in the group of twelve apostles. And we are set for the empowering and the growth of the Church.

Jesus says to them: *you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* This is where the light shines forward. They can believe all that he said while he was with them, since he has said it with the authority of God. They can see that now. And they can believe all he says about the future. They **will** be empowered. They **will** be given words to say when they're in a tight spot. They **will** be able to take the Word of God and do the works of God in places they've never been, places they've never heard of.

Which is where this authority touches on us. For the book of the Acts of the Apostles was just the start. The story went on and still goes on. Although the task may have a changed emphasis, being witnesses for Jesus is still what it is about. Affirming the truth of that one-liner from John: God so loved the world... And the world now is somehow bigger than Peter and Andrew, James and John ever knew.

I led a funeral service at a graveside on Wednesday. The lady concerned, Gwen, was very well prepared but had not opted for one of the better-known passages from scripture for me to reflect on – briefly. She chose instead a comment from Paul in his letter to the Romans. In this (which is from chapter 10) Paul says *anyone who believes in Christ will never be put to shame. For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'* I value that as confirmation that God's love is there for all.

When the leaders of the early Church spoke like this they were drawing on an authority that had its most visible form in the Ascension. Our picture of God was almost complete. So we wait now, with the disciples, with the believers who had followed Jesus, for the Holy Spirit. Not long now. The next instalment is just a week away.

Amen

We will punctuate our prayers with a wee song from the Iona Community Wild Goose Worship Group [taken from their album, *Heaven shall not wait*]:

Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.

Prayers of Intercession

We pray today for all who are afraid ...

We pray for all who are separated from the people they love, both those who are well, but maintaining self-isolation, and those who are ill. We think of all who are ill with Covid-19, whether at home or in hospital, and especially those in intensive care and needing to be ventilated. We ask they should know your nearness in their isolation and lose their fear. We pray also for all the key workers caring for others despite the potential risk to their own health and wellbeing.

We pray also for those with other health conditions needing intervention, especially those who have had consultations or treatment delayed. We remember all who have new diagnoses of cancer or other potentially life changing conditions. We think of those who may be concerned about the continuing availability of the medication they need or rehabilitation following periods of illness.

Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.

We pray for people fearful for their futures because of the impact on the economy of the Covid-19 lockdown. Those who have been laid off, or who know that they will soon lose their jobs. And those who do not know whether their jobs will survive or not. And we think also of those who remain in employment but grieve for colleagues who have lost their jobs. We think of those having to sign on and claim benefits, often for the first time, and those worrying about how they will pay their bills, feed their families or keep their homes.

We pray for people in other parts of the world where the virus continues to spread and to threaten to engulf health services. We think of the 100,000 people who have lost their lives in the US, and of the worsening situation in South America, in particular Brazil, Mexico, Chile and Peru. We also pray for people living in difficult circumstances, such as in refugee camps and in crowded accommodation around the world. We give thanks for the agencies working to protect people from infection.

Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.

Finally, we pray for everyone finding life difficult. All those who are fearful for the future. Those who mourn the loss of old ways of living, whether that is our freedom of movement, our practice of going to church or of meeting freely with friends and family. Help us all to look ahead to a time when we can express ourselves as we used to and help us to manage our fear of the unknown.

We know that fear is natural, and we know that there were times when Jesus himself was afraid. Help us to take courage from you and to support and uphold one another in love.

Kindle a flame to lighten the dark, and take all fear away.

Amen

If you remember the composer of our Trumpet Voluntary, Jeremiah Clarke – his tune is used for our Ascensiontide hymn:

Hymn *The head that once was crowned with thorns*
[Choir of Norwich Cathedral]

The head that once was crowned with
thorns
is crowned with glory now;
a royal diadem adorns
the mighty Victor's brow.

The highest place that heav'n affords
is his, is his by right,
the King of kings and Lord of lords,
and heav'n's eternal Light:

The joy of all who dwell above,
the joy of all below,
to whom he manifests his love,
and grants his name to know.

To them the cross, with all its shame,
with all its grace, is giv'n;
their name an everlasting name,
their joy the joy of heav'n.

They suffer with the Lord below,
they reign with him above;
their profit and their joy to know
the myst'ry of his love.

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.

Words by Thomas Kelly (1769 – 1855)

Blessing

May the ascended Lord Jesus Christ, God and man and God in man, keep you from
fear and harm in this fearful time.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with
us all today and for ever

Amen

Podcast regulars will recall that last week I reported taking part in a BBC mass online recording of the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah*, and promised that music would feature in this episode. Last week's recording was broadcast on Ascension Day and can be accessed on the BBC website. This is an earlier treatment, from the choir of Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford and the Academy of Ancient Music. Not without its family connections, though – it was to hear my LPs of this performance that the future Mrs Young first visited my room when we were at university together.

Music: *Hallelujah* – Chorus from *Messiah* by G F Handel
Choir of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford; Academy of Ancient Music,
cond. 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