**18th April 2021**

The Risen Jesus says, ‘Peace be with you’ Be my witnesses. Go in my power

In worship, let us come to the one who offers peace and power.



**A prayer of approach**

Lord God, whose arms are always open to us,
we come before you today
with hearts and minds open to receive your teaching.
Lead us to understand who you are and what you have done,
and what you require of us as witnesses.
In Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

God, we confess that when distress comes knocking at our door,
all that we have learned and should know
goes flying out of the window.
Our minds in disarray,
we fail to turn to trusted sources of help.
Forgive us for forgetting how to seek you.
We forget your sustaining Word in Scripture,
your presence when we turn to you in prayer,
the calm that is to be found when we seek you in community.
We are sorry for turning in on ourselves,
our minds going round in circles.
Come, risen Lord, break the cycle of our despair.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Our understanding is dark, clouded by dismay,
fearful and lacking in faith,
yet we know that you will understand, Lord.
Shine your light on us
and banish the dark thoughts that overwhelm us;
forgive us the deeds committed
while fearful and bewildered,
and lead us forward in the light of your love.
**Amen.**

**Luke 24:36b–48**

**SERMON**

With restrictions easing off this week we can now grab a coffee outside, hit the gym and meet family in their garden!

The Bible passage today has Jesus meeting up with his startled and fearful disciples after his resurrection over a meal and offering peace and changing their minds and commissioning them to be witnesses of the resurrection power unleashed in the world.

For many years we used to put a banner up outside, between the trees, on the roadside, proclaiming ‘Jesus lives’. A few years ago it got nicked. Now we can’t just put a banner up saying ‘Jesus lives’ – we have to be living witnesses to that fact.

A church minister was putting up a banner one Easter that said Jesus is alive! Someone was walking past at the time and muttered ‘’well that’s very nice for him – but what has it got to do with the rest of us?’

What does Easter mean. What does it mean to be witnesses of the resurrection?

This story of how the Risen Christ meets his disciples offers us some ways in which things have changed and how we should witness to the resurrection. I will suggest three things: It is about peace, repentance and power.

On the third day after the crucifixion Luke reports the disciples are terrified when Jesus appears.

Jesus appears to help them overcome their fears and doubts and find peace.

Unfortunately, the disciples do not recognize Jesus; they thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus presents his hands and feet as a testimony to his identity – this resurrected life is an embodied one. The disciples are still wondering, though filled with joy. Jesus’ second proof of his identity is the request for food. By

eating a piece of fish in the presence of the disciples, Jesus establishes that he is not a ghost.

Then Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself..." The response of the disciples is a sermon in itself. Luke tells us that they still did not believe because of joy and amazement!’ It was simply too wonderful to be true. Maybe you think the resurrection is just too good to be true?

Despite the doubts, scepticism and bewilderment Jesus had faith that these broken disciples of his would be his witnesses. They would witness to the power of the resurrection and the risen Lord.

The first thing Jesus says to them is Peace be with you!

Jesus blesses the disciples with peace. This conventional Sabbath greeting, “Peace be with you,” marks a turning point from the fear surrounding the crucifixion to the joy that erupts in the coming of the Spirit of Christ at Pentecost.

The resurrection declares God’s peace to us. Even though sin and evil had conspired to put Christ on the cross God had the last laugh. But God does not now seek revenge on those who had done such a thing to his Son. God does not now go on a revenge mission, settling old scores. Like in a Hollywood movie. The message is still the same as when Jesus was active in ministry before his crucifixion. Love, peace and forgiveness. Peace be with you.

At the heart of being a Christian is the personal turning away from sin and a self-centred life and celebrating God’s forgiveness and centring our life on that deep peace from which nothing can separate us. The peace of Christ that passes all understanding. It is a spiritual experience – knowing that whatever may happen to you – you are held tight in the love of God. You are at peace with God and that experience of peace with God sends you out to be a peace with others – more about that in a moment.

I remember reading the Shack – a fictional story of how a father comes to term with the abduction and brutal murder of his young daughter. It’s been made into a film that you can watch on Amazon prime – worth a watch. The story wrestles with the timeless question ‘where is God in a world so filled with unspeakable pain?’ The book is very thought provoking. In one scene the father meets God in the form of a kindly black elderly woman who likes baking cookies.

She challenges him: that he sees pain and death as ultimate evils and God as the ultimate betrayer or perhaps at least fundamentally untrustworthy. ‘The real underlying flaw in your life’ she says to Mack, the father whose daughter was killed, ‘is that you don’t think that I am good. Trust is the fruit of a relationship in which you know you are loved. Because you do not know that I love you, you cannot trust me...’

Mack says he doesn’t know how to change that. The reply he gets is ‘you can’t, not alone. But together we will watch that change take place. For now I just want you to be with me and discover that our relationship is not about performance or you having to please me’.

Mack is still caught up with the problem of the murder of his daughter. How can anything justify that?

‘We’re not justifying it. We are redeeming it’ is the answer he gets.

The resurrection of Christ is the start of a new creation: the redemption plan of God – to make good the world – to redeem it. We are witnesses and co –workers in that.

The first words Jesus gives his disciples is peace be with you. Before anything else is said – Jesus comes with the offer of peace. No justification is needed. No show of faith, no contrition nor apology. Peace is offered right at the outset.

I know someone who had a nervous breakdown through worry and not feeling good enough, for God, for life. He had high standards and was hard on himself all the time until he collapsed under the burden. His Christian counsellor told him to meditate on these words of Jesus: ‘peace be with you’. He visualised Jesus standing before him, arms outstretched, hands open wide saying these reassuring words ‘peace be with you’. In Hebrew, ‘peace’, shalom, means fullness - having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself. The bible says you will not be truly yourself until you know you are loved by God and are in relationship to God. That peace is vital for every other type of peace.

But secondly, therefore there is a need for repentance. Repentance literally means changing direction or changing one’s mind. Jesus ‘opens up the minds’ of those disciples to understand the scriptures and how they testify about him and the meaning of resurrection. Jesus changes their thinking and their attitudes and their beliefs.

Repentance and forgiveness of sins go much wider than our own personal relationship with God. They are the agenda which can change the world.

Today’s world is full of disputes, large and small, only a few of which get into the newspapers. Nations, ethnic groups, political factions, tribes and economic alliances struggle for supremacy, each can tell stories of atrocities committed by their opponents. Each one claims that they therefore have the right to the moral high ground, and must be allowed redress, revenge and satisfaction. But it is usually impossible to give an account of a conflict in which one side is responsible for all the evil and the other side is a completely innocent victim. The only way forward is the one we all find the hardest at every level: repentance and forgiveness and speech bent towards reconciliation and fellowship, as evidenced here in how Jesus does not get angry with those disciples but offers peace and sits down with them for a meal.

Sit down and have a cup of tea’ – a classic British response to a crisis. John Steinbeck, when a war correspondent, recorded the story of five commandos who undertook a perilous mission but began and ended with a cup of tea (John Steinbeck, ‘The Lady Packs’ in *Once There Was a War*, Heinemann, 1959). Is it just the comforting warmth of the tea that helps, or is it something about the need to ‘sit down’ and to wait while the drink is prepared? Perhaps the ordinariness of the task in the midst of extraordinary happenings is settling. Does it provide the right circumstances for the mind to open? Is this why Jesus asked for food?

There has been protest and rioting in Belfast in the last couple of weeks. There have been accusations that loyalist groups have been grooming children for violence.

I read about a youth work project in Belfast this week.[[1]](#endnote-1) Forthspring Inter Community Group established in 1997, has delivered services to support the everyday lives of young people alongside the needs of the community and works to ensure there is a safe space to build strong cross-community relationships.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Amy Gribbon was one of the many youth workers who took to the streets as the violence unfolded at the interface between the [**Shankill**](https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/all-about/shankill-road) and Springfield Road, the so called ‘peace line’, offering support to young people.

“We have tried to bring calm and reason to a very chaotic situation, encouraging young people to think about their actions, their communities and their safety," she added.

"If the last week has shown us anything it’s that peace across our communities is fragile and everyone must continue to play their part to foster cross-community relationships and nurture continued good relations efforts.

We must long for politicians and communities on both sides to stop shouting blame over the barrier and start saying, ‘We have different friends to you. If you talk to yours and we talk to ours, maybe we can displace fear and aggression with a more confident identity that will seek the common good.’[[3]](#endnote-3)

As a church we have supported the Corrymeela Community – a non-denominational Christian organisation that has been working for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland for the last 40 years and we visited the community in 2007.

I remember one story they told of how after the Good Friday agreement they invited members from the loyalist community and from the catholic community to meet together. A police officer and his wife were waiting in the reception area when a man walked in. Instantly they recognised each other. He was an IRA sympathiser who had been wanted by the police, and that police man had been involved in his arrest. Immediately the IRA man said he was leaving. But the policeman’s wife said you made all the effort to get here - why don’t you have a cup of tea first. They sat down over a cuppa and talked. They realised they had the same fears and doubts, the same struggles and needs. They came to a point of mutual understanding which opened up an opportunity for change in attitudes – which is what repentance basically means – a change in direction.

Thirdly, because God is a God of peace and reconciliation – when you get involved in that work you align yourself with the power of God. God is behind you. Your will be done…

A few years back I remember hearing Steve Chalke talk at Spring Harvest. He heads up the Oasis Trust that seeks to help build a better society and support those who are most disadvantaged. He told the story of a boy called Sam. Sam had seen his father hack his mother to death. He had stood transfixed in the kitchen watching his father batter his mother into ultimate submission. Not surprisingly Sam now had behavioural issues. He was aggressive and had furious outburst of anger. His father had taught him how deal with anger and rage – through bloodletting violence. What hope was there for this boy?

Steve Chalke told how a little Methodist Chapel had decided that it was time to close. They had got too few in number and decided to close the doors. They offered the church to the Oasis Trust, the organisation that Steve Chalke heads up – that specialises in community work and youth work. Steve urged them to keep going and worked with the church to adapt their premises so that they could host other activities. One of these was an alternative learning centre. That’s where Steve Chalke met Sam and heard about his story. Chalke saw Sam playing pool with one of the members of the Methodist Chapel, a retired seventy year old gentleman. This elderly man beat Sam at pool, but Sam didn’t get angry or burst into a fit of rage. Through the love and care, the companionship and hospitality of this church, individuals like Sam were finding some hope. That game of pool, that elderly retired gentleman, a member of a small church that thought it had had its day, was in Steve Chalkes eyes, a witness to redemption, and a witness to the risen Lord.

Prince Philip’s death has highlighted the enormous difference the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme has brought to the formation and attitudes of young people. This week my youngest daughter got her gold badge through the post. We pray for all young people, arguably the ones most affected by the pandemic and pray for their hopes and prosperity for the future. We pray too that Prince Philips funeral may bring reconciliation to the royal Family and a change of direction for them.

 Repentance and forgiveness will be proclaimed to all the nations – you will be my witnesses. Eyes that are opened. Minds that are opened. Peace that is shared.

But we need power to be witnesses to the risen Lord.

It is a high calling to be a witness to the risen Lord. But we are not left alone, nor are we left to do it in our own strength. Immediately after the charge to be his witnesses, the Lord says I will send you the gift from my Father and you will be armed with power! The Holy Spirit powers us into action. Jesus did not command the whole world to go to church. Jesus commanded his church to go to the whole world.

I see so many people in this congregation who seem to be running on a different fuel to the rest of the world. It’s marvellous. Powered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the Risen Jesus. But being filled with the Holy Spirit will also make you frustrated, restless, burdened with compassion and love, energised into the purposes of God, struggling with doubts and fears, wrestling with the scriptures, needing repentance and forgiveness, believing in the impossible, experiencing the unbelievable.

Are you up for this?

May we know the Peace of Christ offered to us through the sign of resurrection and be witnesses to that peace in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord God who has called us to faith,
in faith we pray for the needs of others.

For the world and its people,
**Lord, we pray.**

Today, we pray for our Queen, who has ruled for as long as many of us can remember, and longer than many of us have lived. In her loss and her grief may she find comfort in the companionship of others, support from family and friends, and strength in her faith in God and life eternal. For all of the Royal family in their grief and change of circumstance, some taking up new responsibilities in new ways and with new purpose, and in their support and upholding of each other.

For the world and its people,
**Lord, we pray.**

For all who grieve for the loss of loved ones, family or friends, near or far away. Especially those who are bereaved a long way from family who can’t travel to be with them to offer comfort and support. In their loss, in their grief, in their solitude may they find a calm centre and be upheld by their faith, their friendship and their neighbours.

For the world and its people,
**Lord, we pray.**

For those whose bodies are ravaged by pain and illness, by disfigurement and disability. For those fearful of treatment and those waiting for treatment.

For the world and its people,
**Lord, we pray.**

We pray for those of faith and those of no faith, for those with purpose and those with no purpose in life. For those who have a clear direction and those who flounder uncertain for life in all its complexities. For those whose mental health causes them pain, anguish, confusion and loneliness, for those who feel abandoned, unwanted, unloved and un-helped.

For the world and its people,
**Lord, we pray.**

For countries at war with other countries and within themselves, for their people who fear for their lives and stability, for those made homeless and jobless and offered nothing but an uncertain future. For those countries where violence comes all too easily to the fore and where it is hard to grasp the real reason behind it. Remembering countries at war where their people are damaged, isolated, abused, for Myanmar, Ethiopia, Mozambique and closer to home for the people of Ireland and Northland Ireland, for Catholics and Protestants, those of faith and those of none.

For the world and its people,
**Lord, we pray.**

For Christians trying to work out the best way to live out their lives, true to their faith, to the Gospel, to their calling. Trying in these days to do the best they can, pulled this way and that. Trying to look beyond the present to the future, beyond their immediate neighbourhood to the world wide family, for we are all God’s children. Help us to catch a wider more inclusive vision of the needs of the world and its people for unless we are all fed no one is satisfied, unless we are all inoculated no one is safe.

For the world and its people,
**Lord, we pray.**

For countries with surging Covid cases, for those with poor infrastructure and resources, for countries with little PPE and no vaccines and no realistic prospect of national immunisation any time soon. For those engaged in trying to resolve such issues no matter what faith, colour, creed, it is their need that needs to be met along with providing sufficient food and housing, safety and stability.

For the world and its people,
**Lord, we pray.**

For ourselves we pray that our ears may be used to hear the cries of the needy, that our eyes be used to see the needs around us, that our voices be used to speak up for the marginalised and the poor, that our hands be used to reach out in comfort and that our lives be used to improve the lives of others.

For the world and its people,
**Lord, we pray. Amen.**

**Pray**

Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Peace be with you’ –
they responded with bewilderment..
Jesus opened their minds –
they became his witnesses.
So, Lord, may we too find peace in your service,
with opened minds and hearts on fire empowered by your Spirit.
**Amen.**

1. https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/belfast-community-group-working-support-20370792 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.forthspring.org/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/112-march-april-2021-b/easter-3/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-3)