

A month of Sundays – July 2021



Worship

Preston Ribble Circuit

Ministry Team

Sunday 4th July 2021

Call to worship (Psalm 100)

Shout praises to the LORD
everyone on this earth.

Be joyful and sing as you come in
to worship the LORD!

You know the LORD is God!

He created us, and we belong to him;
we are his people, members of his crew.

Be thankful and praise the LORD
as you enter his church.

The LORD is good!

His love and faithfulness will last forever.

Opening prayer

Loving God, we have come to worship you.

Help us to remember that you are here with us.

May we pray to you in faith,

sing your praise with gratitude,

and listen to your word with eagerness.

Help us to worship you

with all our heart and mind and strength;

through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reading - John 20.19-30

Reflection (Reverend Ray Borg)

One of the most poignant and touching passages of scripture which come after the resurrection of Jesus is his encounter with the apostle Thomas. The passion and crucifixion of Jesus must have been horrendous to watch. It was a traumatic experience for all the disciples, but it seemed to affect Thomas even more than the others.

I think Thomas has been given a rough ride by Christians down the centuries. Despite all the evidence in the gospel accounts showing that most, if not all, of the disciples had deserted Jesus and later doubted his resurrection, it is this man who has been given the unenviable label of “doubting Thomas”. Thankfully the NRSV titles this section of John’s gospel as simply “Jesus and Thomas” without any hint of stigma which the notion of doubting brings into play.

The questions that have remained with me for several years about the Thomas incident are these; “What was it about Thomas that made him so reticent to believe his fellow apostles when they told him they had seen the resurrected Jesus?”; and “What was it about Thomas’ experiences which warranted special mention in John's gospel?”

I think it is very hard for us today to comprehend the trauma of crucifixion. If you have watched the film by Mel Gibson called “The Passion of The Christ” you will have a good sense of the sheer horror and brutality of it all. It would be enough to traumatise most of us reading this reflection. But there is no doubt that the passion of Jesus affected Thomas more than the others. But I don’t think it was just the brutality of it which stunned him. I think that from where he was looking at the time, it seemed as if they had reached the end of the road and the hope for him, his nation of Israel and the world had evaporated on that cross.

There are events in life that seem to contradict the notion that God is working for good. When we see the news on TV, the whole of humanity questions why God doesn’t intervene. Believers, agnostics and atheists ask why God doesn’t wave a magic wand over things and make everything well again. When there is pain, we wonder why Jesus doesn’t remove it. People are devastated when prayers don’t deliver what they ask for. We struggle with the knowledge that Jesus raised Lazarus

from the dead yet many others, some dear to us, remain dead. We don't understand why Jesus heals some but not others. Is it any wonder that we sometimes doubt?

What Thomas witnessed some 2000 years ago made him doubt everything that had gone before. Later he would see things differently, but in that moment in John 20 he doubted his fellow apostles' testimony. I think it's important to state here and now that Thomas was not a deviant, wretched, demon possessed or in any way abnormal. He was a normal person trying to cope with and make sense of the senseless killing of Jesus and the tatters in which that left the future he believed he was promised.

We all have times in our lives when we cannot seem to make sense of what we are experiencing. Call it doubt if you must, but to be unable to make sense of the things we are going through is not a sin. In fact, it is part and parcel of being human.

I recently heard someone say that faith is the tension between what we believe on the one hand and our lived experience on the other hand. I think that's a very good way of putting it. It is not difficult to see that faith will struggle to hold the tension between belief and reality if what we believe is inappropriate. For example, if we believe that God is like a big genie in the sky who is poised waiting to grant our every good and wholesome wish, then it won't be long before our faith is strained to breaking point. The lived reality cannot match that expectation because that does not appear to be the way God works. Misunderstandings about phrases like "Ask whatever you want in my name, and my Father will give it" have caused preachers to preach badly and for expectations (and perhaps faith itself) to be dashed.

I remember a time when I first came into ministry, when I asked questions about my worthiness, my effectiveness as a minister

and the 'results' which I expected to see but was not seeing. In short I felt I was failing. I wanted to know why God wasn't adding thousands to our membership daily as the Book of Acts seemed to imply would happen when the gospel was preached. Was I not preaching faithfully? Was I not working hard enough? Was I doing the wrong things? Was God refusing to bless my preaching? And the mother of all questions; Was God angry with me? As I look back some eleven years later, I can now see that my expectations were inappropriate.

And I think something similar happened to Thomas back then. When Jesus died on that cross, the happy ending he had imagined for himself, his fellow disciples, the nation of Israel and the whole world just melted away. I can understand how his world seemed to fall apart, not least because it appeared at that point that he had backed the wrong man, even if the cause was good. And if I'm honest, I feel desperately sad for Thomas at that point in his life. We sometimes forget we know the happy ending of the Jesus story but at that point he did not know it would all be well in the end.

This brings us to an important lesson which we need to learn from the story of Thomas' wobble; At the point when everyone thought God was doing nothing, he was doing everything! Think about that for a moment. It is profoundly true and of immense importance. When it looks as if God is doing nothing, he is doing everything.

When I thought I was failing as a minister I did not doubt God's being, God's power or God's goodness. I doubted myself which in turn made me doubt my calling. Perhaps Thomas was going through something very similar. I thought I knew what God was going to do with my ministry, but the story is not unfolding as I expected. Thomas thought he knew what God was going to do with the carpenter from Nazareth, but the story didn't unfold as he expected.

The story of Thomas contains good news for all of us who have times of doubt. Jesus did not dismiss Thomas, nor did he deride or shun him. In fact the evangelist seems to imply that Jesus paid a second visit to that bolted room just for Thomas' benefit. His invitation to touch his wounds was a restorative act designed to restore the peace which Thomas so desperately needed.

Doubting is not a sin. It is part of the human condition and Jesus knows it all too well because he was fully human. He knows the nature, cause and consequences of our doubts and we can find solace in that fact. We don't need to hide from him and his love will cast out fear when the time is right. But there is also an important command within this episode. Jesus commands Thomas to keep on believing in him even if life doesn't make sense. And we are commanded to do the same.

Unlike most literature of the time, the bible paints an honest picture of various characters and presents them warts and all. I believe that John included this cameo with Jesus and Thomas so that we would take heart and see in the man Thomas our very selves - not to encourage wallowing, but so that we can see that we are normal human beings, that sometimes our faith wobbles and that needn't be terminal.

So let's thank John for telling us about Thomas and let's thank Thomas for sharing his vulnerability with us and not ripping that page out of John's gospel :-)

Collect

Father God,
you have created all things
and through Christ revealed your salvation
in all the world.
Give us a vision of your glory
and by your Holy Spirit fill us with life and love
that we may praise and serve you
through Jesus Christ our Lord,

who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

God the Holy Trinity
make us strong in faith and love,
defend us on every side,
and guide us in truth and peace;
and the blessing of God the Father,
the Son and the Holy Spirit
be among us and remain with us always. Amen.

Sunday 11th July 2021

A prayer of approach

All-powerful one,
we come today to worship you,
safe in the knowledge that you are in control.
Amen.

Hymn

- 1 Make me a channel of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring your love;
where there is injury, your pardon, Lord;
and where there's doubt, true faith in you:
 O Master, grant that I may never seek
 so much to be consoled as to console;
 to be understood as to understand;
 to be loved, as to love with all my soul.

2 Make me a channel of your peace.
Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope;
where there is darkness, only light;
and where there's sadness, ever joy:

Refrain

3 Make me a channel of your peace.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
in giving unto all that we receive,
and in dying that we're born to eternal life.

A prayer of adoration

Mighty God, we adore you.

We thank you that we can come to you
knowing that you care about each and every one of us,
and all our needs, however big or small.

You created the heavens and the earth.

You put stars into space and filled the mighty seas.

Your power and your greatness is all around us –
from mountain-tops to the intricacies of a tiny flower.

Thank you that your power is limitless.

We are so small in comparison, but you love us all the same.

We adore you, Creator God.

Amen.

A prayer of confession

Powerful God, forgive us

when we have not used our power to influence for good,
but for our own purposes;

when our actions have hurt and excluded others;

when we have allowed greed, fear and pride
to get in the way.

God, forgive us.

Let our thoughts, our words and our actions
glorify you and reveal your presence and purposes. Amen.

An assurance of forgiveness

The almighty and powerful God forgives your sins.
When you have put yourself before others,
God forgives you and heals you,
giving you grace and mercy
and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Reading: Mark 6.14-29

Reflection by Revd Jane Wild - The Death of John the Baptist

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want

you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.’ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Amos 7.7-15

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A plumb-line.’ Then the Lord said, ‘See, I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.’

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, ‘Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, “Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.” ’

And Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.’

Then Amos answered Amaziah, ‘I am* no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am* a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”

We often hear the phrase, 'speaking truth to power'. In reality, not many of us – not many people anywhere – get a genuine opportunity to speak truth to power close up.

There is a discretion of some high end shops that goes if you need to ask the price you cannot afford it, In both of the bible passages this week we see a great cost paid in service of God. Life and reputation. This week's readings – from Amos and Mark – highlight, at least in some circumstances, the true cost can be for those who do challenge the powerful 'face to face'. The prophet Amos was critical of international and domestic policies and was viewed as a traitor. John criticised the personal morality of those in power and was killed for doing so. We know from the news that there are countries in the world where similar challenges would lead to similar results – prison, exile, even death. In Preston it might be a scathing criticism and censure by whichever 'flavour' of politicians have been upset. And also, inevitably, the suggestion – the demand – that religion should keep out of politics.

I suppose my answer to that is to agree that party politics and religion are not a good fit but if politics is about how we arrange our living together and matters such as leadership and truth. For me this is at the heart of faith. So how do we rise to the challenge?

How should we respond to that? Perhaps, as footballer Marcus Rashford did last year, during his campaign for free school meals during holiday periods, saying: 'This is not politics, this is humanity.' It is the duty of those who follow Christ to speak out, as Christ did himself, on issues of truth and justice and the values of the kingdom of God – they are issues of humanity.

There is always a cost to being prophetic, even today – but that doesn't mean we should avoid it. On the flipside, there is a danger, a risk, of self-righteousness – of assuming that we have got it right, that we have the answers, of comparing our

supposed 'innate goodness' over and against those we might challenge. That is not acceptable. And that is why Jesus taught humility and love – so that our words and actions might always be proportionate, and our motives sincere and true. And the key is: who or what rules our motives and actions?

Prayers of intercession

We pray for children who are adopted or fostered,
that they will find the love and security they need.
Bless them, good Lord.

We pray for social workers and organisations
that work to bring families together.
May love and deep understanding guide their steps.
Bless them, good Lord.

We pray for parents who have
difficult choices to make for their families.
Be in their thoughts and decision-making.
Bless them, good Lord.

We pray for those who
have yet to find their purpose in life,
or those who live each day without hope.
Bless them, good Lord.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much
that we have been chosen by you.
May our lives be worthy of our calling.
Bless us, good Lord.
Amen.

A sending out prayer

Heavenly Father,
from the very beginning of Genesis,
we see the relationship between word and action –
you spoke and it was so.

As we leave this place,
may we be aware of our words and actions.
May the Holy Spirit guide us,
so that what we say and what we do
builds up your kingdom,
and breaks down barriers.
This we ask in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Sunday 18th July 2021

Call to worship

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Come away...and rest a while.'
Come into the Lord's presence now, away from the burdens
and stresses of life. Come with open arms, and receive the rest
that Jesus offers – to restore our souls and equip us for
whatever comes next.

Opening Prayers

O God, you are our shepherd. Your care and compassion were
shown in the life of Jesus. We ask that, this very day, we may
experience the rest you offer, the peace that can restore and
revive us and enable us to live the promised abundant life. In
Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

Gracious God, you always make time for us; we are sorry that
we don't always make time for you. When we are rushing
around being busy, sometimes even when we are doing your
work, we forget about you.

We are sorry when we make our lives so full that there is no
room left for you – no room to get away, to be in a quiet place
with you.

Forgive us, Lord, and help us not to hurry but to slow down, to
make space for you to dwell within us. And in that dwelling
place, may we seek what you want us to do and who you want
us to spend time with.

Help us to get the right balance, a right rhythm that is in tune with you. Even though we have gone astray, you are our Shepherd – the one who brings us back to the fold. We are assured of your forgiveness, and we are set free in the knowledge that you always make room for us. **Amen.**

Bible readings

Psalm 23; Mark 6: 30-34; 53-56

Reflection (Revd Karen Le Mouton)

No matter how hard I work before taking a planned break, it always seems to be a tight schedule to get the workload organised in order to be away. But also, to be prepared for those things that are in the diary for when I return. At times, it does make me wonder if going away is worthwhile! Yet I know there is a definite need for everyone to take a break from their regular routines. Busyness and the accompanying stresses are a common problem for many people.

These few verses from Mark's gospel can tend to be overlooked as they link the various 'focus' passages of well-known stories before and after these verses. Yet, there is some good advice found here.

The context is the area around the Sea of Galilee, which I have been fortunate enough to visit twice in the last 30 years. I was impressed by how large the 'sea' was, which is really a lake – rather like those you find in the Lake District or in Scotland. With access to a boat, it's possible to row or sail across to the other side. Yet because of the hilly ground surrounding the lake, anyone watching from the shore would have a good view of your progress and could make a good guess as to where you were going to land. Furthermore, the means of rowing at that time, was not the fastest way of getting across - people could actually get there on foot before you! This is what happened when Jesus took his disciples away to a quiet place to rest.... the crowds got there before them.

At this time, Jesus seems to have been recognised and followed by crowds wherever he went, with little time to rest or even eat on occasions. Having listened to his disciples about all they had been doing whilst they had gone in pairs to the surrounding areas, Jesus knew there was a need for himself and for his disciples to get away and have some time alone, or 'me time' as we would say. However, his plans were somewhat thwarted!

For some people, the idea of stopping and resting when they are so busy is counterintuitive. Yet if we are not doing God's work from a place of well-being, we will not be working effectively. It is not always wrong to put yourself first. An example of this is when you fly, the safety demonstration always instructs people to put their own mask on first before trying to help someone else. Looking after ourselves puts us in a better position to show compassion to others.

So, a few questions to ponder: Do you seek rest when you most need it? Where do you go to for your spiritual 'me time'? Where do you find God's Spirit breathing into you and giving you the 'oxygen' or power, you need to demonstrate and shower your compassion and love on others?

You don't actually need to go anywhere to be on 'retreat' or have that dedicated alone time with God, you can 'retreat' from your daily activities for any amount of time and withdraw into a space, which then becomes that sacred space for you and God. Let God metaphorically lead you 'beside still waters and lie down in green pastures'; let God meet you in your busyness, in your stresses, in your isolation, worries and concerns; let him pour his lavish love and compassion over you while you tell him all you have been doing and feeling; then listen to what he says to you.

HYMN StF 248

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.

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.

I heard the voice of Jesus say:
'I am this dark world's Light;
look unto me, your morn 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.

Horatius N. Bonnar

Prayers

We pray for people of other cultures who live among us.
Thank you for the richness that they can bring to our lives.
We pray for our fellow citizens of earth and heaven.

We pray for people who feel excluded for reasons of race,
culture, colour, disability, age, or anything that makes them feel
'bad different' and not 'good different'. We pray for our fellow
citizens of earth and heaven.

We pray for countries at war, for the people who suffer,
perhaps not even understanding what the fighting is all about.

Bring them hope, Lord. We pray for our fellow citizens of earth and heaven.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. We pray for those who deliberately go into danger to negotiate for peace, and for ourselves that we might bring God's peace to our neighbours. We pray for our fellow citizens of earth and heaven.

We pray for new communities being built up around us: housing estates, schools, churches, places of work and leisure. Bless them all, Lord. We pray for our fellow citizens of earth and heaven. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Blessing

O God, in Scripture we read that you rested on the seventh day – after all the busyness and work of creation; and we read of Jesus' desire for his disciples to rest. As your followers, your disciples, now, and as we return to our busy lives, may we know the rest you offer every day of this week. And the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen.

Sunday 25th July 2021

Call to Worship:

Let us bring ourselves to God, whatever our age or gifts. Let us prepare to share in worship, giving thanks for all that God shares with us. Let us open our hearts and minds to know more of God's unconditional love and care, and be ready to share it with others. Amen.

Hymn:

Praise my soul the king of heaven, to his feet thy tribute bring
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like thee his praise
should sing!

Praise him! Praise him! Praise the everlasting king!

Angels in the height, adore him; ye behold him face to face;
Sun and moon bow down before him, dwellers all in time and
space.

Praise him! Praise him! Praise with us the God of grace!

Prayers:

Hospitable God, extravagant provider, we worship you because we can. You take our inadequacies, our limitations, and pour out your blessings upon us. We stand in awe of you, sensing your presence among us. Overwhelmed by your kindness, we fall at your feet. Amen.

With our time and with our money forgive us Lord, when we have not been generous. In helping others, and being hospitable forgive us Lord, when we have not been generous. When we have been blessed with so much; forgive us Lord, when we have not been generous. When we could have gone the extra mile and shared what we have; forgive us Lord, when we have not been generous.

In using our resources, gifts and talents; forgive us Lord when we have not been generous. Most generous God, help us to be more like you. Amen.

God, you forgive us when we make mistakes, when we have not shared what you have given us. We come to the cross knowing that we are healed and forgiven and given a second chance to be the people you have called us to be. Amen.

The Lords' Prayer

Reading: John 6-1-21: Jesus feeds the 5,000

Reflection: (Rev Barbara Pettitt)

“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” John6v9

The feeding of the 5,000 is a very familiar story and it is found in all four gospels. Maybe that’s why it is so familiar. As you might expect it’s slightly different in John’s gospel compared with the other three gospels. He stresses that it is Passover season and Jesus makes all the running. We also have the inclusion of Andrew, eager to please, bringing the packed lunch of a young boy. Maybe the other disciples were secretly laughing at such a small offering. But Jesus takes that small offering of five loaves and two fish and transforms them into a banquet. Perhaps for the laughing disciples they and we learn that Jesus can make use of whatever offering we make no matter how large or how small. He takes it without comment, he takes it and give thanks and transforms it. Sometimes we might feel we have nothing much to offer but whatever we have to offer can be used and transformed by Jesus.

Look at your two hands a reminder of the two fish. Then look at the fingers on one hand. Five of them, reminders of the five small loaves. Look closely, turn your hands over, perhaps clap them, wiggle your fingers and stretch them. They are ordinary, everyday things our hands. Maybe something we take for granted. With our hands we can do so much, we can hurt or heal. We can help or hinder. Hands are very important.

Consider these things: What are your ‘loaves and fishes’? We each have something that we can offer to God, what can you bring? What could you do with your five fingers and two hands? What five things might your fingers remind you to give thanks for? What two things might your hands remind you to do?

Prayer:

Lord God, we thank you for all that you provide for us in so many ways. May our five fingers and two hands remind us of how you took a little and multiplied it for the benefit of so many and encourage us to give what we can. By the power of your Spirit, take what we offer and make it so much more. Help us to provide food, care and support in your name. help us to be bold in our expectations of what you can do with and through us. Amen.

Hymn:

Brother, sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace, to let me be my servant too.
We are pilgrims on a journey, and companions on the road;
We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.
I will hold the Christ-light for you in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.

Brother sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

A sending out prayer: Lord help us to remain thankful for even the simple things. Keep us focused on your loving, generous nature, so that we can freely share what we have and who we are. Let us be cheerful givers and humble receivers, that all may have enough and be satisfied. Amen.