

Sunday Morning Worship
Readings, Reflection and Prayers 7th April
Easter 2



Exodus 14.10-31; 15.20-21

A reading from the book of Exodus.

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, "Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians"? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.' But Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. And the Egyptians shall

know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.'

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, 'Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.' So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'

This is the word of the Lord.

Acts 4.32-35

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

This is the word of the Lord.

John 20.1-18

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John.

Glory to you, O Lord.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Reflection by Margaret Mandrell

Nowadays we see the idealised images of the supposed lives of many people shared freely on platforms such as Facebook, and they depict the best of experiences, rehearsed and sometimes altered. This is to improve the image, as was done by the Princess of Wales recently. In contrast to these digitally altered, manufactured pictures, we have in our reading from Acts a picture of a changed reality. It is a glimpse of unity and sharing in the early church, with the group "of one heart and soul" listening to the apostles' teaching about the resurrection. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and experienced grace. This inspired them to share what they had. This is a huge contrast to the narcissism so often seen today.

The Bible is God's love letter, a story of what went wrong with humanity, how God took steps to sort out the mess man made, and how Jesus came to bring redemption, and a relationship with God, based on faith. Sadly, God's chosen people have often rebelled but God has remained compassionate and gracious showing love and forgiveness. God's love is revealed most perfectly in the life, death, resurrection of Jesus. Pope John Paul 11 expressed it in these words "As a gift to humanity, which sometimes seems bewildered and overwhelmed by the power of evil, selfishness and fear, the Risen Lord offers His love that pardons, reconciles, and reopens hearts to love. It is a love that converts hearts and gives peace."

The disciples were very confused, sad, disappointed and afraid. Their world had fallen apart and the future was uncertain. They had left their homes and jobs, security and sense of belonging to a tight knit community for what? Fear and threat and probably an early and brutal death. When the risen Jesus appeared He said to them "Peace be with you." and they rejoiced as they recognised Him. Their fear was replaced by faith and trust. Their anxiety was transformed into wholeness and

peace of mind. Thomas was not with them, and doubted, only to have Jesus address him directly, and offer to show him the scars and wounds he had suffered. Thomas acknowledged his Lord and Saviour, and so was able to share the calm and hope his presence brought. The disciples were transformed from fearfulness into confidence and became messengers who went out boldly to proclaim Christ risen and salvation for all who believed.

We, as Christians, can share in this peace which no sorrow, danger or suffering can diminish. We can put aside our doubts and fears and know we are loved by a compassionate God and that each one of us is precious. We can accept the love of the risen Lord which gives peace, that most special gift which can transform our lives. We can see God's love in the beauty which surrounds us, in the love of family and friends, and in the care shown by His followers for one another and for the wider community. When we are weighed down by grief, His presence gives comfort and hope. When we feel distress at the suffering caused by poverty and deprivation and feel overwhelmed, these words by John Greenleaf Whittier can bring comfort. "Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our striving cease, take from our souls the strain and stress and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace."

We can take inspiration from St Francis who encourages us in the words we know as "Make me a channel of your peace, where there is hatred let me show your love, where there is injury, your pardon, Lord, and where there is doubt, true faith in you."

Prayers

To the words,
Lord, in your mercy

Please respond,

Hear our prayer

The Church of Christ

Lord, we pray for the Church worldwide, for its leaders and its people, and ask you to be a real and living presence amongst us all. Protect all Christian people and help us to influence our country for the good of all. Like the disciples in the locked room, we sometimes find ourselves paralysed by fear – of the unknown, of our inadequacy, and of the challenges that lie ahead. In those moments, we have doubted your presence and questioned your plans for us. Like Thomas, there are times when we demand tangible evidence, seeking assurance in what we can see and touch rather than trusting in the unseen reality of your love and grace. Forgive us Lord for our limited vision and we ask for the faith to believe without always needing to see.

Silence

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Creation, human society, the Sovereign and those in authority

Father, we thank you for your wonderful world and ask that you deepen our appreciation of your creation. We pray for peace in our troubled world and for all the world leaders, that they may uphold what is right for peaceful union between all countries. We pray particularly for the people of Ukraine and for all victims of that war, and we cry out to you in the midst of the pain and trauma of violence and fear which prevails in the Holy Land. Be with those who need you in these days of suffering and we pray for all people of all faiths. We pray to you, O Lord, for an end to violence and the establishment of peace throughout the world, bringing justice and equity to everyone.

Silence

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

The local community

Heavenly Father, we thank you for our neighbours, our friends and for the people around us with whom we work and share our daily lives. We pray for those who are starting back at educational establishments after the Easter break particularly any young people who are unhappy at school. We pray for those who are struggling with their family life and bring before you those who are lonely, those isolated because of ill-health, and those who find it difficult to make friends or be accepted. Show us all what we can do to help, and teach us to be good neighbours and true friends.

Silence

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Those who suffer

Father, we pray for all those who are sick and suffering, and for their carers. Just as you showed your wounds to Thomas, reveal to us the areas in our lives where healing and transformation are needed. Make us aware of the woundedness around us, and guide us in acts of compassion, mercy, and reconciliation. We bring before you in a moment of quietness those we know or love who are ill or in need at this time, naming them in our hearts. And from our own congregation here at St Stephens we pray particularly for: Joyce Pringle, Peter Murphy, Anuwat Wanggane, Joan Tyson, Alan Coe, Sam and Andy Fellows, Jack Tubby, Stacey Pearce, Rob & Lucy, Roger Jones, Patricia Ash, Jason Thomson, Ryan Day, Bryan Plester, Brenda Hulland, David New, and Adrina and Alan Price.

We bring all those who suffer to you, confident that you love them, know their every need and that your healing power will prevail.

Silence

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

The communion of saints

Father, we pray for all those who have died and thank you for their lives and what you have taught us through them. We pray for those who have recently died: Revd. Michael Dunn and all those who mourn his loss.

We remember with love and gratitude those whose anniversary of death falls at this time: Marian Stinton, Pat Carpenter, Emily Jones, Brian Purvis, Barbara Ervine, Jim and John Hellicar, David Phillips, Tom Roberts and Mike Niccolls.

May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

We pray for all those who mourn, whether their loss is recent or longer term, and ask that you sustain them in their grief. May we not fear death but welcome it as the final fulfilment of all you offer us, and we thank you for the promise of eternal life.

Silence

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

May the same Spirit that breathed peace into the locked room breathe forgiveness and renewal into our hearts today. Empower us to go forth with courage, sharing the good news of your resurrection and embodying the love that casts out fear.

Merciful Father,
accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.