

Sunday 17th May – 6th Sunday of Easter

Opening hymn – Tell out my Soul

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
Tender to me the promise of his word;
In God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
His mercy sure, from age to age the same;
His holy name, the Lord, the mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
The hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
To children's children and forever more!

Easter greeting

Alleluia, Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Praise – Psalm 66:7-end

- 7 Bless our God, O you peoples;
make the voice of his praise to be heard,
- 8 Who holds our souls in life
and suffers not our feet to slip.
- 9 For you, O God, have proved us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.

- 10 You brought us into the snare;
you laid heavy burdens upon our backs.
- 11 You let enemies ride over our heads;
we went through fire and water;
but you brought us out into a place of liberty.
- 12 I will come into your house with burnt offerings
and will pay you my vows,
which my lips uttered
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
- 13 I will offer you fat burnt sacrifices
with the smoke of rams;
I will sacrifice oxen and goats.
- 14 Come and listen, all you who fear God,
and I will tell you what he has done for my soul.
- 15 I called out to him with my mouth
and his praise was on my tongue.
- 16 If I had nursed evil in my heart,
the Lord would not have heard me,
- 17 But in truth God has heard me;
he has heeded the voice of my prayer.
- 18 Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer,
nor withheld his loving mercy from me.

**All Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.**

Collect for 6th Sunday of Easter

Risen Christ,
by the lakeside you renewed your call to your disciples:
help your Church to obey your command
and draw the nations to the fire of your love,
to the glory of God the Father.
Amen

Readings

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

John 14:15-21

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

Sermon – Rev Paul Day

There was once a young child asking her parents about God.

Is God in the world?

Yes – God is everywhere

Is God in our street?

Yes – he’s everywhere.

Is God in our house?

Well yes, God is everywhere so he is in our house

Is God in this room?

Yes ...

(seeing a small shoe box) is God in this box?

Well, yes I suppose so ..

(closing lid quickly) Got him!

I was reminded of that story by Paul’s comments to the Areopagus – an assembly of the great and the good in Athens - that we read about in today’s section from the Acts of the Apostles. He has been looking around the city and has seen many altars and shrines and buildings dedicated to various gods. He said to the people *The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands*

We limit God at our peril. Whether that limiting is to a building or to sets of rules or instructions, or to particular words or prayers. Any attempt to limit God leads us to a dead end. God is not to be bound.

In some senses we are learning that afresh now as we are excluded from our church buildings because of the lockdown. Week by week; in cities, towns and villages across the nation, people are finding new ways to worship; new virtual ways to gather together. Some as we are doing by recording worship and encouraging people to participate at the same time on a Sunday morning; others who are live streaming services at a set time and still more who are using online conference facilities like zoom to allow for a genuine participative worship. Each parish or church doing their best to adapt to the changing world and to meet the needs of their people. And, from all the comments I have seen and from our own experience here in Shirley, each is seeing an increase in the number of people participating.

We are all finding that by it being possible to take part in worshipping God outside of the church building we are making it possible for him to be known by more people. More people are praying, more people taking part in worship, more people asking deeper questions.

And it was this idea of being able to know God that Paul spoke of in his address to the influential thinkers of Athens. He pointed out to them that he had seen an inscription on an altar “to an unknown God” and he spoke about how the God of heaven and earth has made himself known in the person of Jesus and, more than that, wants to be known to each one of us. This God wants to meet with us and us to meet with him. And he shows us how in the person of Jesus.

Reading the gospels it is easy to see that Jesus brought the presence of God to ordinary people in their ordinary lives. He showed by his life and example and words that God is a God of love who wants to include and encourage rather than exclude and condemn. The religious leaders of the time had imposed a whole structure of rules and regulations – effectively trying to restrict God to a list of rules in much the same way as the Athenians were trying to restrict him to a shrine. Jesus showed that God is not to be bound. He is boundless in love, forgiveness, acceptance and freedom. We see this in the way he talked to outcasts, tax collectors and people of dubious character. There is more joy over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who have no need of repentance (and therefore no desire to accept this unconditional love).

Over these past few weeks I hope you have been able to listen in to the various midweek reflections presented by members of the ministry team here. Reflections on the characters who met with the risen Jesus.

May Magdalene – who, in her grief and sadness was met by Jesus in the garden by the tomb and in doing so had her sadness turned to joy.

Thomas – who in his doubt and uncertainty was met by Jesus in the locked room and in doing so was able to express his faith in Jesus – his Lord and his God

Cleopas and his companion – who in their misunderstanding and confusion were met by Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and in doing so had their eyes opened in so many ways.

Peter – who in his failure and self doubt was met by Jesus on the beach and was affirmed and equipped for his role as a leader of the church.

And then this week we heard of Stephen. Why have we included Stephen in this list of those who met the risen Christ? And why, in a couple of weeks time, will Paul be included? After all, there is no evidence that either of them met the risen Jesus, and no certain evidence they even encountered Jesus before his death. So why include them?

We know that both of them had visions of the risen Christ - Stephen before he died when he saw Jesus in heaven at the right hand of God, and Paul - Saul as he was then - on the road to Damascus when he heard Jesus speaking clearly and directly to him – *Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?*

And we also know that both of them were full of the Holy Spirit.

In our gospel reading today Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit. He is talking to his disciples at the last supper and preparing them for what lies ahead. Here he promises “another advocate” who will live in them and be with them for all time. And, we believe, one who will live in each one of us and be with each one of us for all time.

An advocate is one who speaks for someone or supports someone in public. To describe the Spirit as another advocate says a couple of really important things.

First it reminds us that Jesus often spoke up for people; publicly supported them and defended them. The woman caught in adultery, the man born blind, the woman who anointed his feet and many more. He was their advocate.

And second it says that this is something the Spirit of God does for each of us. Stands up for us; supports us; encourages us and defends us. Speaks in our favour against all the negative voices that seek to judge us or condemn us. The Spirit is our advocate.

Jesus is saying that through the Holy Spirit he himself would be with them and will therefore be with each one of us for all time, no matter whether we have ever met him in the flesh.

With this in mind we can see how, as well as seeing the risen Christ in their visions, both Stephen and Paul – because of the presence of the Holy Spirit – effectively had Jesus with them at all times.

So our collection of those who met the risen Jesus is rightfully extended beyond Mary, Thomas, Cleopas and his companion and Peter to include Stephen and Paul and could be extended further to include everyone who believes and trusts in Jesus and has the Holy Spirit within them. And that includes you and it includes me. Perhaps we would do well to reflect on how the presence of the Spirit – the other advocate – within us has changed us like it changed those early Christians.

So we have travelled a journey this morning. We began by thinking about buildings, and how the lockdown has meant that we can no longer use our church buildings or allow God to be restricted by them. We noted that many are looking to God in some ways during these strange times, and that just as God made himself known to people in the person of Jesus when he walked the earth, so he is making himself known to all – people like you and me - through the Spirit today. That God is not unknowable as some may think, but that we all can know him and enjoy him.

We don't know when or how this lockdown period will end; we don't know what life will be like after it does end. But we can be sure that it will be different, but that the God who through his Spirit has been alongside us in the confusion will be there with us as we emerge into whatever new future might be in front of us. We can be sure because Jesus promised that the Spirit would be with us always as our advocate, our support and our encouragement.

Introduction to the Peace

Jesus says to his disciples:

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you.

Not as the world gives do I give to you.

Let not your hearts be troubled or afraid.”

The peace of the Lord be always with you

And also with you

Blessing

May Christ's holy, healing, enabling and encouraging Spirit be with you
and guide you on your way at every change and turn.
And the blessing ...

Final hymn – Great is thy faithfulness

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
there is no shadow of turning with thee;
thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;
as thou hast been thou forever wilt be.

Great is thy faithfulness!
Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see:
all I have needed thy hand hath provided--
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
join with all nature in manifold witness
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.
Great is thy faithfulness! ...

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!
Great is thy faithfulness! ...