Second Sunday of Easter

Second Sunday of Easter – 28 April 2019

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank the Very Rev Dr Sheilagh Kesting, former Ecumenical Officer and Secretary to the Ecumenical Relations Committee, for her thoughts on the second Sunday of Easter.

This material also includes prayers from our archive material written by Jock Stein (retired Minister, formerly of Tulliallan and Kincardine).

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Introduction

The readings for the Second Sunday of Easter help us to explore what it means to be witnesses of the resurrection. It is not about analysing or debating the nature of the resurrection. Rather, it illustrates the effect of belief in the resurrection in shaping the early Christian community and, ultimately, in shaping the Church of today.

Acts 5:27-32

Three points to note:

(1) It is extremely important that this passage is not used in any way that can be interpreted as anti-Semitic. It was written in the context of its time. From our vantage point so many centuries later we know that both Jews and non-Jews were implicated in the death of Jesus.

(2) The role of Gamaliel (the Pharisee, v.34) deserves to be mentioned. The portrait given of this man is not of a stern legalist more concerned with the outer forms than the spirit of religion. He comes across as a warm and compassionate teacher, aware that the God of Israel sometimes acted in ways that were surprising. His response to the apostles was consistent with this. Not only did he not put an obstacle in the way of the apostles, he positively gave them space to prove whether or not what they were saying and doing was ‘of God’ (v.38). Gamaliel played his part in enabling the story of Jesus to be told in ways that connected with people in their need.

(3) The apostles were able to reaffirm that the will of God is more binding than any human authority. At the core of their message lies the resurrection of Jesus by the God of Israel. They draw a stark comparison between God’s grace in offering repentance and forgiveness and the murderous actions of Jesus’ enemies. The witness of the apostles is to be found in their experience of empowerment – the gift of the Holy Spirit, which gives them courage to speak out and is available not just to a chosen few but “to those who obey Him” (v. 32).
Psalm 150


This Psalm is a determined, enthusiastic, uninterrupted, relentless, unrelieved summons which will not be content until all creatures, all of life, are ‘ready and willing’ to participate in an unending song of praise that is sung, without reserve or qualification. The Psalm expresses a lyrical self-abandonment, an utter yielding of self, without vested interest, calculation, desire, or hidden agenda.

Praise is all encompassing. The praise of God in worship renews the commitment of our whole life to God. It is the offering of our whole life to God. Taking into account other psalms, praise ultimately involves all creatures and all creation. All nations, indeed, all the earth are invited to praise God. So the climax of the Book of Psalms invites ‘all that breathe’ to praise the Lord, echoing the creation of the world and human life within it (Genesis 2).

Revelation 1:4-8

Within this short passage there is reference to the work of Jesus’ ministry, particularly His death, His role as God’s witness, and the present and future significance of His resurrection.

(1) Jesus’ ministry is summed up in terms of love and forgiveness (v.6). Both Paul and the First Letter of John see love as foundational for understanding Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, both in terms of God’s love for humankind and Jesus’ love for those who came to Him. First Peter refers to the Christian community as a priesthood and a nation. There are echoes of this here too. But what is different about Revelation is that the writer sees the kingdom as one that is set against ‘the kingdom of Satan’ (2:13). In this passage, therefore, the writer is bringing together a number of different themes from early Christian teaching.

(2) Jesus is described as ‘the faithful witness’ (v.5). This needs to be understood against the backdrop of Revelation as a letter written to a community in which some had been killed for the witness they had given to Jesus. (cf. Rev 2:13, 6:9-11 and 17:6). The reference to the witness of Jesus is somewhat ambiguous throughout the book as it sometimes seems to refer to testimony about Jesus and sometimes about the witness Jesus gave.
Nevertheless, the significance is of witness given despite the danger of death and persecution.

(3) Jesus is the first witness, born from the dead (v.5). This has echoes of 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, in which the resurrection is associated with the ‘first fruits’ of the harvest. As ‘first born’, Jesus becomes the promise that the last word will not be death, nor the powers of Satan. Resurrection here becomes the promise of the ‘new heaven’ and ‘new earth’, not a trick by which one individual is resuscitated, but the renewal of creation itself ['Texts for Preaching – Year C', Cousar, Gaventa, McCann, Newsome, _Louisville_, 1994 p 281].

**John 20:19-31**

In John’s Gospel, the resurrection, the giving of the Holy Spirit and Ascension to God are all wrapped into one event that flows directly from the crucifixion, when the ‘Son of Man’ was ‘lifted up’ and ‘glorified’.

(1) The gathered disciples have heard Mary Magdalene’s story but they are afraid and stay huddled behind closed doors. Jesus’ appearance brings first words of reassurance (‘Peace be with you’) and then the marks of the wounds confirm this is the person they knew, scarred by crucifixion. As with Mary, the result of the encounter is the transformation of fear into joy. This is followed by a commission: as Jesus had brought words from God, so they were to pass on the words they had received from Him. The words of peace, Jesus’ gift to them, were not for them alone. The giving of the Spirit, ‘He breathed on them’, with its echoes of Genesis 2, surely marks a new creation, the formation of a new community commissioned to proclaim the Gospel of forgiveness. This passage is the fulfilment of the prediction made in chapter 16:13 (‘the spirit of truth’ that would lead them into all the truth). It is worth noting that the greeting, ‘Peace be with you’, ‘Shalom’, is the normal, everyday greeting that is used to this day in Middle Eastern countries. So in this story, what is ordinary and everyday is given a new meaning – something that happens again and again in the story of Jesus.

(2) Thomas is first absent and sceptical about his friends’ experience. Then he has his own experience of Jesus' visible scars. His response is an amazing confession of Jesus as ‘My Lord and my God!’ Thomas thus becomes one of a number of people – Mary, Peter, the beloved disciple, and the other disciples – whose experience of the resurrection provides a witness for all readers of this Gospel. Jesus’ response to Thomas in v.29 should not be seen as a put-down but simply as a statement that Thomas (and the
others) have no privileged position above those who come later and who are not eyewitnesses but nevertheless believe.

(3) The concluding verses (30-31) are ambiguous, in that the Greek verb can be translated as ‘you may continue to believe’ or ‘you may come to believe’. Given the wider context of the Letter and the probability that it was written at a time of persecution of the Christian community, it may well be more about words of encouragement to the existing community than an evangelistic pitch to non-believers. What is also interesting about these verses is that it portrays a community of believers whose faith is rooted in the recorded witness of others. In other words, putting the words into a written record enables those who have not seen to become and remain believers. We are now talking about a people of the book. Neither oral tradition nor a continued line of mystical experiences provide the life-blood of the church.

Sermon ideas

(1) From the Gospel passage, the preacher may wish to reflect on the context. The disciples are coming to terms with their grief, life is returning to normal and they are remembering their friend. The marks of suffering are a reminder that there was no pretending that the ghastly events of the past days had not happened. The familiar greeting is comforting. But it is more than a simple greeting. Its effect is similar to the breaking of bread in the house in Emmaus. It is the trigger for the memory of words spoken by Jesus to His disciples after the foot-washing (John’s story of the Last Supper) when He had promised them His peace: ‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world does. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid’ (14:27). For John the resurrection, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the sending out of the disciples to take forward the mission of God in the world all belong together; one movement that flows from the crucifixion.

(2) For a focus on Acts, the preacher might wish to reflect on the way in which the authorities who had found Jesus’ teaching so disturbing and threatening now find themselves equally threatened by the unstoppable energy and influence of Jesus’ followers. The story about Jesus was proving as powerful as the man Himself had been. Both drew large crowds.

The court room scene makes clear that those who oppose Jesus and His teaching are those who work against justice and who lack compassion in human living – no matter who they are.
To witness to the resurrection is to allow our lives to be shaped by justice and compassion. It is to understand this as a gift, as empowerment by the Holy Spirit. It is to reflect God’s purpose for all people (cf. Micah 6:8).

Gamaliel played his part in the spreading of that witness in allowing the apostles to make their case and thus connecting with people in their need, bringing them hope and purpose through forgiveness and healing and the offering of respect and a vision of justice that was for all. God can act in surprising ways and through people we might least expect.

When so much of church life today is focused on survival, the focus here is on widening our horizons to recover the all-inclusive nature of the commission given to the apostles and those who followed them.

**Time with children**

Gleaning different ways in which we greet one another and say ‘hello’, the focus could be on Jesus’ greeting, ‘Peace be with you’ (shalom) – the ordinary, everyday greeting that came to have a different meaning. So, in church, we might use the greeting ‘the peace of Christ be with you’. It is more than just a hand shake and more than just words. It connects us to one another and, as Jesus’ greeting to the disciples, it links us with Him and identifies us as His followers and disciples. As such, it also means we are expected to live a life of peace-making. The time could finish with the sharing of the peace.

**Prayers**

[The following section provides a rationale for writing prayers for worship. Some examples of prayers from the Weekly Worship archives, written by Jock Stein, are found at the end of this section.]

**Approach to God**

A Trinitarian approach would allow praise to be shaped around God’s gift in creation, in humankind and in the life-affirming role of the Holy Spirit.

**Confession**

The shadow side of creation – the despoiling and abuse of the earth’s resources, the greed and selfishness of people, relationships distorted by fear and hatred, and broken peace among the nations.
A response might be used:
Lord, have mercy
Christ, have mercy
Lord, have mercy.

Declarations of forgiveness or supplications can be added from Common Worship. This would tie in with the themes of love, forgiveness and peace of the readings.

**Thanksgiving**
In keeping with the resurrection and new creation themes, thanksgiving could focus on aspects of attitudes and actions that are life affirming, particularly those which seek to remove barriers that keep people trapped in poverty, abuse, disadvantage and prejudice and violence of any kind.

**Intercession**
Praying for peace in the world; in the church; in families and communities; and inner peace for ourselves and those troubled in spirit and mind; addressing in each aspects of life that diminish humanity and stand in the way of peace; naming sources of fear and grief. Prayers can also be said for those who work for justice and peace in church and society and those who support the vulnerable and bring companionship to the lonely and undervalued.

Prayers of intercession could end with a statement of the vision outlined in the readings of the whole earth showing forth the glory of God, united in praise and growing in respect for creation and people alike.

**Prayers**

**Sentences and opening prayer**
Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He gave us new life by raising Jesus from death...
Those who look to God are radiant with joy;
they will never be put out of countenance.

Our loving God,
Your purpose is to give life.
You have created life in the midst of this vast universe, and You have renewed that life for ever in the person of Your own Son, risen from death.
So we come with joy before You, 
to worship and to adore You, 
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, 
one God blessed for ever. 
We come as we are, 
wearing this frail humanity 
which Jesus took to wear Himself. 
We come with our faith and our doubts, 
with our achievements and our failures, 
with our past and with our potential. 

Forgive us what we have done wrong 
or failed to do right, 
and help us to change by the wisdom of Your Word 
and by the power of Your Spirit, 
according to Your gracious purpose for us and with us, 
through Christ our Lord. 

You are greater than we can imagine, 
the one who is, 
who was, 
who is to come. 
We cannot contain You in our literature, 
in our films, 
in our music, 
in our art, 
nor even in our worship. 
But in Jesus Christ we know You as our friend, 
and this is our wisdom and our delight, 
now and for all ages to come. 

**Collect**
Almighty and eternal God, 
the strength of those who believe 
and the hope of those who doubt, 
may we, who have not seen, have faith 
and receive the fullness of Christ’s blessing, 
who is alive and reigns 
with You and the Holy Spirit,
Prayers of thanks and for others
We give thanks today for the Christian year, for the busyness of festivals and the quiet that follows, for the rhythms of life and death, and for all whose lives have shown what it means to live in harmony with Your good purpose.

We give thanks for the great hymns of Holy Week and Easter that we have sung and enjoyed. May their message sustain us through ordinary days, and encourage us to live with thanksgiving in our hearts, through Jesus Christ our risen Saviour.

We give thanks for the wisdom of Scripture, for its wonderful variety, for its focus on your covenant purpose for Your people, for its fulfilment in Christ. May the Bible be read, loved, understood and followed in our world today, for Your name’s sake.

Today we pray for the world in its need, for those who seek refuge from war, and for those who guide the response to such need. We pray for politicians; may they give a lead well, and do their work with honesty and diligence, for Jesus’ sake.

We pray for the sick, and those who care for them. May they live with hope, may they find care and healing, may they know they are remembered and loved. And may this congregation be a healing community,
welcoming the stranger
and caring for the troubled, for Jesus’ sake.
We pray for our parish [or city]:
may the lonely find a friend,
may the prosperous live with generosity,
may all practise kindness.
We remember our neighbours of other religions,
we remember our neighbours of no religion,
we remember our neighbours about whom we know little.
If we have enemies, we pray for them;
if we have absent friends or family,
we ask a blessing on them, in the name of Christ.

We pray for the church.
May she live and grow,
may she conform to the image of Christ,
may she become a shelter and a light for many peoples.
Guide the Moderators of Assembly and Presbytery,
strengthen our office-bearers and workers,
inform well our conveners and office staff,
for Your mercy’s sake.
With thanksgiving for all our brothers
and sisters who live and serve You in heaven,
with hope for all Your people on earth,
we pray as Jesus taught us,

Our Father...
Musical suggestions

- CH4 108 – “Praise the Lord within his holy place” (Psalm 150) – could be used if the Psalm is not used as one of the readings

- CH4 419 – “Thine be the Glory” – the removal of doubt – picks up theme from the Gospel reading

- CH4 430 – “Christ has risen while earth slumbers” – for the handing on of the commission to us – picks up the end of the Gospel reading

- CH4 432 – “How often we, like Thomas” – links directly to the Gospel reading

- CH4 447 – “Sing to the world of Christ our sovereign Lord” – picks up the themes of love and forgiveness and new life, linking the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, as John does.

- CH4 488 – “Teach us, O loving heart of Christ” – would fit around the prayer of confession

- CH4 566 – “When I receive the peace of Christ” – the gift of peace leads to change in attitude and action

- CH4 609 – “Come, living God, when least expected” – picks up the theme of the people of the book at the end of the Gospel passage and the transformation of doubt into joy and hope.

- CH4 646 – “Forth in the peace of Christ we go” – picks up themes of peace and new creation and the church as a priesthood (Revelation)

- CH4 689 – “Just as the tide creeps over silver sand” – picks up doubt and fear and how love brings fresh life

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