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Sunday 7th May 2023

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

The Rev’d Andy Braunston

**Call to Worship**

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! **He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!

Exult, all creation around God’s throne! Jesus, our King, is risen!

Sound the trumpet of salvation!

**Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!**

Rejoice, O Earth, in shining splendour,

radiant in the brightness of our King!

Jesus has conquered! Glory fills you!

Darkness vanishes for ever!

**Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!**

Rejoice, O holy Church! Exult in glory!

The risen Saviour shines upon you!

Let this place resound with joy, as we sing,

echoing the mighty song of all God’s people!

*adapted from the Exultset*

**Prayers of Approach, Confession and Pardon**

O Most High,

in You we take refuge,

in You we find peace,

in You we find security.

When our world seems complex and confusing, painful and pitiful,

dangerous and disturbing,

we find in You comfort and strength.

Jesus, Embodied Word,

You understand the pain of this world;

through Your death you defeated the powers that seek to ensnare and hold us captive.

You show us how to be free, and how to use our freedom wisely.

Eternal Flame of God’s love,

You quicken our hearts, remind us of the joy that is within us,

and show us where we need to experience resurrection.

You show us where our hearts are hard,

our minds resistant to your Word,

and where our attitudes betray our calling.

Give us time, Gentle One, to change,

time to put right all that is wrong,

time to turn around again and find You running towards us,

arms outstretched, ready to hug and envelop us in love. Amen.

Friends, here is good news,

the Most High, the Source of all mercy has,

through the death and new life of Jesus, the Enfleshed Word,

sent the Flame of Divine Love amongst us that we might be free.

Through the ministry of the Church,

may you find freedom and peace, reconciliation and renewal,

that, at the end, you may rise with Christ

and be happy with Him forever. Amen.

**Prayer of Illumination**

Fix our gaze on you, O Most High,

that we may see Your glory, in our world, in our lives

and in Your coming Kingdom,

and as we listen to Your Word, read and proclaimed,

give us ears to hear and hearts to respond,

that we may change our world and be changed ourselves. Amen.

**All Age Activity**

*Last Words*

It is said that before a condemned prisoner was executed they were asked if they had any last words. Thomas More, killed by King Henry VIII for not obeying his order to leave the Catholic Church said, on the scaffold that he died the King’s good servant, but God’s first. Queen Mary of Scots famously repeated Jesus’ words before she was executed (for plotting to overthrow her cousin from the throne of England) “Lord Jesus, into your hands I commit my spirit.” These words of Jesus were used by Stephen whose story we’ll here in a little bit as he was killed by people angry with him.

I wonder if we knew we were about to die what would our last words be? Might we say something profound? Might we cry out for our mums? Might we want to tell a loved one how much we loved them? Might we want to make our last words a prayer?

Of course there’s no need to wait for our final moments before saying profound things, talking to our mothers, or telling those we love how we feel. There’s no need to wait until we die to talk to God.

Pause now and, in the silence of your hearts, tell God what is most on your mind, what troubles you the most. (give people a few minutes to make their prayers, then sum up with:

Lord Jesus,

You wrapped us love when we were born,

and in your arms we will die.

Hear the prayers we offer to you,

and help us always to know we can pray,

in good times and in bad. Amen.

**Readings**

*Acts 7:55 – 60* | *Psalm 31*  | *1 Peter 2: 2 -10*

**Sermon Notes**

Preachers these days are not used to much of a reaction after we’ve finished a sermon. We might get some positive words of encouragement, we might get some gentle critique; I had a member of my church in Barrhead judge my sermons on how near they were to 10 minutes! Yet these polite interactions are different to the patterns we see in the Book of Acts. In Chapter 2 Peter preached to the crowd and 3,000 converts were made. Today, in Chapter 7, Stephen’s preaching costs him his life. Maybe “lovely service minister” isn’t too bad considering the alternatives!

Stephen, the Church’s first martyr was, it seems to me, something of a mixed bag when it came to preaching. Just before this passage he preached to the Council and told the leaders they had resisted the Holy Spirit and persecuted God’s prophets - just as their forebears had done! Stephen told them they’d persecuted and murdered Jesus, that they’d received the Law but had broken it. It wasn’t a sermon to win friends and influence people! It might have been speaking the truth to power but wasn’t wise – it ended in his stoning. But there’s true witness in today’s passage – as Stephen was dying he declared: “Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” To witness is to say what God is doing in our lives.

We’re called to be witnesses – to tell the truth about God from our own perspective. Rather than presenting intellectual arguments we’re called to tell what we know about Jesus. This is what the martyrs of the early Church did.

The Psalm set for today, Psalm 31, echoes the first reading with its understanding that God is our refuge. The Psalms were, and are, the prayer book of the Jewish people and, later, the Church. Stephen used v5 “into your hand I commit my spirit” and made that a prayer to Jesus. This Psalm sustains believers in distress and offers us hope. The Psalm oscillates between trusting praise of God and fear and scorn of enemies who flee from the Psalmist in the street, who see the writer with horror, who have forgotten the writer as if dead. The poet both trusts in God and calls on God for vindication. It’s as if God has taken a long time in answering the prayers and the writer is trying to stir God into action. God has not yet rewarded the righteous or punished the wicked, God has not stirred and smitten the ungodly. God has not repaid everyone for their deeds. Knowing that the Sanhedrin would, like Stephen have known this Psalm I wonder if Stephen’s use of it was a little sharp – reminding his hearers that they would, one day, face judgement. Another form of witness but not always a useful one!

In these joyful days of Easter we reflect on the Risen Lord and his call to us to be his witnesses.

As contemporary Christians we find this difficult; we’re in a society which is very tolerant but which gets a bit uncomfortable when religion is talked about. Moving away from a narrow minded judgementalism of earlier generations of Christians we’re unsure what to say to someone if we feel that we want to share our faith, or if we’re asked about it. It’s hard even though the stakes aren’t as high for us as they were for Stephen!

Our reading from 1 Peter offers us some help as we bear witness. Here the writer offers us hope telling us that we’re like new-born babies that need pure milk and uses this image of food to give a sense of the Lord – we taste and see the Lord is good. We most often taste and see the Lord when we share Communion together. Here, gathered around the Lord’s table we are fed by the Lord’s own self through the simple things of bread and wine. The writer realises the difficulty in sharing faith; for those who believe Jesus is precious, the cornerstone of our lives, for those who don’t then Jesus can be a stone that makes folk stumble, a rock that makes folk fall. Yet the writer tells us some remarkable things to ponder in these days of Easter – once we were not a people, but now we’re the people of God. We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation – God’s own people. And our purpose? God has called us out of darkness into marvellous light that we may proclaim God’s mighty acts. We’re back to bearing witness again.

Easter is a time for renewal. In the Northern hemisphere we’re in Spring, new life abounds us. Here in Orkney flowers have been coming out and are enjoying our long days. Birds are rearing their young, flying and singing with joy, flowers are pollinating through the action of bees and other insects, nature sings with new life and joy. Jesus, our King, rose from the dead giving us joy and courage to speak of his marvellous works, enabling us to bear witness. So how might we do this?

Do our daily lives reflect the joy we feel as believers?

* Does our daily conduct speak of love and light?
* Are we able to tell others why we have faith if they ask?
* Are we able to bear witness like Stephen and Polycarp of old? To simply say why we love God?

We don’t need to be articulate, learned, mugged up on all the current intellectual trends; instead just to be able to say what the difference that faith makes to us. It’s different for each of us.

* For some it’s a sense of comfort in a complex life,
* for others it’s an awareness we’re not alone and we can face the hardness of life with hope,
* for others it’s a sense of being healed, set free from guilt,
* for others it’s energy to set about changing the world for the better.

Whatever it is for you – find the strength to gently tell others, to bear witness this Eastertime and all through the year. Let’s pray together:

**Affirmation of Faith**

You, Most High, offer us refuge;

You deliver us and never put us to shame.

**You are, to us, a strong fortress and a secure rock.**

You, Jesus, offer us security but You don’t promise safety.

To follow You is to risk all.

As the martyrs of old found,

to bear witness to You has its dangers.

As today’s martyrs know,

to proclaim Your marvellous deeds

disturbs the powers that seek to rule our world.

Yet, we believe **You are, to us, a strong fortress and a secure rock.**

Be gracious to us, Eternal Flame of Love,

when life is hard, when enemies prowl, when people laugh at us.

Let lying lips be stilled,

let the haughty be humbled,

and those who wait on You be delivered. For,

**You are, to us, a strong fortress and a secure rock.**

**Intercessions**

Eternal One,

Your glory fills the earth,

and in these joyful days of Easter,

we bring our praises and prayers to you.

We rejoice in the new life around us;

flowers in bloom,

crops growing in fields,

lambs skipping, running and playing with in their flocks,

calves running joyfully with playmates in their herds,

birds renewing their love through song, flight, and nurture of chicks.

Trees in leaf, reaching their branches up in praise of You.

In Jesus You have reconciled all things to Yourself,

renewed creation with Your glory,

and given us the awesome responsibility

to live in harmony with all creation.

Help us to fulfil Your call to us.

*pause*

Risen Lord Jesus,

on the Cross, and in the tomb,

You defeated the powers of death and evil,

rising to new life,

vanquishing even death.

You showed that love can defeat violence,

unjust power can be usurped,

and evil can be resisted.

You call us to follow You,

bearing witness to Your love and life,

telling and showing how You want us to live.

We pray today for those who lead and seek to lead our nations,

that they may resist evil,

turn away from policies which seek to divide or promote injustice,

and which ignore the poor, the hungry, the homeless and the destitute at our gates.

*pause*

Flame of Love, Eternal Spirit,

You are at work in creation and culture,

causing us to see the divine glory in the most unexpected places.

You call us, again and again, to turn back to You

and away from the ways of hatred, war, and chaos that we prefer.

Bless those who work for peace this day.

Give strength to those on the move this day

fleeing from war, poverty, famine and persecution.

Give wisdom to Your persecuted Church

meeting in fear and secrecy this day;

prayer groups in Iran and Saudi Arabia,

underground congregations in China and North Korea,

and all believers who are persecuted for declaring Your love and life.

*pause*

O Triune One,

we pray this day for the nations which make up the United Kingdom.

Eternal God, You order and govern our world and all that is therein,

bless, we pray, Charles and Camilla

as they celebrate coronation and anointment,

that amid the pomp and ritual,

they may feel your loving presence,

that they may fulfil the roles prescribed for them,

and that we may, in this kingdom, be better governed,

and always reminded of your eternal Kingdom which is to come.

*pause*

Accept, O Three in One, all our prayers which we offer,

and, in Your time, make our world whole,

until then, we join with Jesus as we pray Our Father….

**Offertory**

Week after week we give. We give of our time, our talents and our treasure. We give because it’s part of our faith. We give to support the work of God in the Church and in the world. Giving is one way in which we bear witness, it’s putting our money where our mouths are. We give to charities and church, in plate and envelope, direct to the bank and in one off donations. To be a Christian is to give; giving from our poverty and our plenty in order to work for the Kingdom’s coming. Let’s pray:

Giver of all that is good,

we return to You some of what You’ve given us.

Bless our generosity even when it’s grudgingly given,

that through our lives and gifts, Your kingdom will come. Amen

**Holy Communion**

We have shared bread and wine many times in our lives,

in many places, for many different reasons.

The bread that we now break and the wine that we now share,

are a sharing in the life of Christ.

May our acceptance of it today be a sign of our faith:

* in the ongoing goodness of a God who journeys with us
* in the power of love to remove any barrier within or between us
* in the mystery of the call given to each of us

to make bread, and life, and beauty, available to all

For it is the bread of heaven, the bread of the poor and the bread of our own lives.

And we pray that we may recognise You O Risen Lord Jesus:

* every time we join someone on a journey
* every time we share a meal
* every time we take bread in our hands

And may this recognition of You

call forth such joy in us that we might never lose sight of Your goodness.

We pray, Fire of Love,

that You will come upon these gifts of bread and wine

which Mother Earth has given and human hands have made,

so that they might be, for us,

the Body and Blood of Jesus, our saviour and brother:

who, before dying, took some bread,

said the blessing, broke it, gave it to the others and said,

"Take this all of you and eat it.

This is my body which will be broken for you,

do this and make me real in your lives."

Later on Jesus took a cup filled with wine,

said the blessing, gave it to the others and said:

"Take this all of you and drink from it,

for this is the cup of my blood,

the blood of the new and everlasting promise of God

which shall be shed for you and for all,

do this and make me real in your lives."

Let us allow Jesus now to become real for us as we say together the central mystery of our faith.....

**Christ has died! Christ is Risen! Christ will come again!**

Eternal Majesty,

we pray that this bread and wine will inspire such love in our hearts

that we may continually keep alive Your memory and promise.

May this meal provoke such a longing for truth in us

that we may never be satisfied

until the whole Earth experiences Your justice and Your peace. Amen

So let us eat and drink as Jesus taught,

inviting the stranger to our table, and welcoming the poor.

May their absence here serve to remind us

of the divisions this meal seeks to heal.

May their presence here truly transform us

into being the Body of Christ which we share.

Let us share this bread and wine as Jesus taught,

knowing that our lives are forever changed

by this and every breaking of bread and sharing of wine.

*To prepare ourselves to meet the Lord in Holy Communion*

*let us sing the Lamb of God.*

*adapted from More than Words © 1986 J Schaffran & P Kozak.*

**Post Communion Prayer**

O God,

you have chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty;

shed forth continual day upon us who watch for You,

that our lips may praise You, our lives may bless You,

and our meditations glorify You, now and forever, Amen

*from the Sarum Breviary and quoted in Rejoice and Sing*

**Blessing**

May God, Eternal Majesty,

give You joy and hope in these Eastertide days.

May God, Enfleshed Word,

give You grace to bear witness to light and love which vanquishes evil.

May God, Flame of Love,

inspire You to follow despite all the difficulties which get in the way.

And may the blessing of Almighty God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

be with you all,

those you love

and those you struggle to love,

now and always. Amen.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** | | | | |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| *This Joyful Eastertide* | 248 | 415 | 314 |  |
| *Jesus Is Risen Alleluia* |  | 409 | 304 |  |
| *They Crucified My Saviour and Nailed Him to the Cross* |  | 406 |  |  |
| *The Strife Is O’er, the Battle Done*  If you have a music group consider singing this unaccompanied with a drum to keep the rhythm | 250 | 412 |  | 670 |
| *Come Ye Faithful Raise the Strain* | 236 | 414 |  | 103 |
| Now the Green Blade Riseth | 243 | 417 | 306 |  |
| *Our God Stands Like A Fortress Rock* | 585 | 454 | 623 | 2 |

The Communion hymn *Gifts of Bread and Wine* can be found in many contemporary Catholic hymnbooks and is well worth learning. You can see the score here

<http://www.sacredservices.com/sheetmusic/giftsOfBreadAndWine.pdf>

and listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-NLrnyjHo4>

This version of *Psalm 31* works very well Make your face to shine upon your servant,

You can hear it here

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTlN5C2bVDo

The words and score can be found in *Psalms for All Seasons* published by the Calvin Insitute for Christian Worship.