

worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 3rd May
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
The Revd Andy Braunston

Opening Prayer

In you, O Lord, we take refuge,
You are our shelter in distress.
Let us never be ashamed,
but save us in your righteousness.
O Lord, turn your ear to hear our cries;
come quickly to deliver us,
and be our rock and firm defence,
our stronghold and security.
You are our fortress and rock;
for your name's sake be our sure guide.
Preserve us from life's traps;
You are the refuge where we hide.
Redeem us, LORD, O God of truth;
We commit our spirits to you.
We trust You, LORD,
for You are truth.

Prayers of Approach, Confession and Grace

We praise You O Most High, in these days of Easter joy;
You are our light, our hope, and our salvation!
For you have chosen us before the ages to be precious in Your sight,
and You build us into a spiritual house,
a holy priesthood, Your own people.

We praise You, Risen Lord Jesus, in these days of Easter joy;
You are our way, our truth and our life!
But sometimes we prefer our way to Your way, our lies to Your truth,
our fixation with death and decay to Your life.
Forgive us, good Lord, and give us time to change,
time to feed on your spiritual milk, that we may grow into our salvation.

We praise You, Most Holy Spirit, in these days of Easter joy,
You are our inspiration, our guide, and our energy!
Give us the grace to receive Your mercy and forgiveness,
that we might not stumble but stand firm in Christ,
the cornerstone of our faith, now and evermore, Amen.

Prayer for Illumination

We come to You now, Most High,
to hear Your word, Jesus Christ, our way, truth and life,
read and proclaimed.
Break open our hearts to let in Your light,
that we may listen, understand and follow. Amen.

Readings

Acts 7:55-60 | Psalm 31: 1-5, 15-16 | 1 Peter 2:2-10 | St John 14:1-14

All Age Activity

Roots suggests this skit (with apologies to C S Lewis)

Characters: TV Presenter, The Devil, suited with horns,

Short theme music plays, recorded or live, invented or borrowed.

Presenter: Welcome to another edition of 'Civilisation'. We're immensely proud to welcome, at great personal cost to the production assistant, (Devil removes and throws a bone from his mouth), someone who goes by many names: the Devil, Lucifer, Beelzebub, Satan and Editor of the Sun. Your Royal Darkness, you're active in many spheres. What's your latest project?

Devil: I want to make believers embarrassed to use the name of 'Jesus' in company. They can talk of their church, their faith but never – you-know-who.

Presenter: Seems a little thing. Is it worthy of your time, Your Unspeakableness?

Devil: Where I come from, the J-word is very powerful. Knocks my minions for six. There's a great spiritual battle. I wear my armour when we have to use the name. Like now.

Presenter: But, O Beast, to people it's only a word.

- Devil: We know and fear that the name of 'Jesus' can save sinners. The less our followers on earth are confronted with that name, the better. Don't disturb.
- Presenter: Isn't it unfair to hide it from people, Your Eminence? The verse says, 'Jesus is the way, the truth and the life' and no one comes to the father except by him.
- Devil: I'm a very fair man. I don't mind if people don't use my name. Anything to help them think I don't exist and I can get on with my work quietly.
- Presenter: O Wily Serpent, the symbol of Christianity is a cross. Jesus is very much identified with that. How do you deal with it?
- Devil: You know, I was sitting in York Minster the other day – I like to visit churches – and a woman said to her young daughter, 'Let's go and buy a nice crucifix.' By turning a symbol of faith into an icon of fashion, or art, I've largely neutralised that threat.
- Presenter: One final question, Angel of Light. Do you have problems with the word 'Christianity'? Christ is at the centre of the word.
- Devil: Why can't we get rid of Christ altogether? Change the name from Christianity to Churchianity. Let people think religion is all about going to church.
- Presenter: O Roaring Lion, it's been a privilege to have been had by you today.
- Devil: I look forward to eating – meeting you again.

<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/107-may-june-2020-a/easter-5/explore-respond>

Sermon Notes

Acts

The Lectionary leaves out Stephen's speech and Saul's, more than incidental, involvement in Stephen's death which is developed in the next chapter. Stephen's speech, which angers the Sanhedrin, is the whole basis for the Lectionary passage but is a text you should take care with as it comprises two key themes of the Luke-Acts project – casting Jewish refusal to believe in Jesus as the Messiah as disobedience to God and a desire to indicate God's universal presence rather than locating it solely in the Temple. In chapter 6 Stephen is accused by some Jews of blasphemy (but the offence looks like saying the Temple was a merely human not divine construction) and bring him before the council where false witnesses are presented who charge him with saying things both against the Temple and the Law. There's a parallel in St Mark 14 with Jesus' own trial and a parallel with Jesus

with the quotation from Psalm 31. Stephen's speech is the longest recorded in Acts (which might be why the editors of the Lectionary omit it) and recounts many of the stories of Jewish history before majoring on Moses presenting that story in terms of the Jewish people's continual disobedience. If you contrast with Nehemiah 9 you'll see there a strong rebuke of the people's disobedience but paired with an affirmation of God's mercy and fidelity to the Covenant which Luke does not have. In 6:40 Stephen notes that God turned away from the people in response to their disobedience (Exodus 32: 9-10), but omits to mention Exodus 32:14 where God turns back. Stephen claimed in v 48-50 that the building of Temple was contrary to God's will; most Jewish tradition at the time held that, whilst the Temple was a legitimate place to worship, God was universal. For most of the speech Stephen identifies with the Jewish people "our ancestors" but in v52 separates himself using "your ancestors" when speaking of "stiff necked" people who oppose God. Stephen also suggests that those who do not accept Jesus have made themselves guilty of his murder (again in v52) and, in v53, finally gets round to answering the original question at the start of ch7 by saying he's not the guilty one of going against the Law but, rather, those who don't believe in Jesus are in breach of the Law and continually violate it. He draws a link between the disobedient people in Moses' time with his accusers and judges now. Not surprisingly this doesn't impress the council. This is the background to today's passage. Whilst stoning was a method of execution allowed in the Jewish scriptures this seems to be more like a spontaneous lynching by an angry crowd. Preachers are used to mixed reactions to their efforts; earlier in Acts we see over 3,000 people converted because of Peter's preaching, today's passage indicates a very different reaction! To be a martyr means, literally, to be a witness. Stephen did a rather poor job of witnessing in his preaching, he gave a summary, and as I noted above, not entirely accurate, version of Jewish history which he ended with insults and rebukes. It clearly was not a winning exegetical strategy. However, in the passage we do have today Stephen manages to be a better witness to the faith; his vision of Christ in glory is proclaimed, he prayed that his killers would be forgiven showing that his life had changed by the overwhelming all-powerful love of Christ. He told them what he knew of Jesus – and gave a better witness in his death than he had in his sermon; a salutary note of caution to those of us who dare to preach.

Psalm 31

The Psalm as a whole is a cry to God for help detailing the Psalmist's despair and a thanksgiving for deliverance in vv 19-24. It's worth having all the Psalm read not just the Lectionary's snippet. The Lectionary's selection of verses today focuses on the cry for help and the guidance sought in the hope of help. It's a fitting echo of Stephen's words in our first reading. Unusually for a Psalm this poem bounces between despair and hope – woe is me / you will save me. It speaks of personal pain and suffering in ways which resonate down the ages and couples that pain with unshakeable faith in God. This is a prayer asking for God to step into the poet's life to bring about justice – both for the good and the bad – as God has been absent (or slow to act) and has not rewarded the righteous or punished the wicked; themes we might see in our world now. There is, however a stubborn insistence that God will do this eventually Here we have the all too real summary of the

pain of human experience with a dogged insistence that God will act in God's own time. "Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD." (v24)

1 Peter

1 Peter was, historically believed to have been written by St Peter but scholars think this is unlikely due to a much better standard of Greek than would be expected from a Galilean fisherman and the use of the term 'Babylon' for Rome which came into use only after the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 CE which is after the normal date of Peter's death in 64. The letter was written in a precarious time for Christians in the Empire; no longer able to be seen as a subset of the, legal, Jewish religion they were a disparaged, and sometimes persecuted group. Persecution of Christians was sporadic and localised until the 3rd century. Nero was savage in his persecution and under his reign it is thought Peter was killed. Jews had limited legal toleration but were seen as unpatriotic for their refusal, like the Christians, to take part in the imperial cults. City gods needed to be appeased through worship and sacrifice in case they sent misfortune; Christian and Jewish refusal to take part in this was seen to endanger the common good. Like the Jews Christians were seen as taking part in strange rituals, being oversexed (!) and engaging in lewd acts. As Christianity became distinct from Judaism it could no longer seek the legal protection offered to Jews. A new identity as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" was created to sustain Christians in times of despair and despondency. Although despised by the Roman world they are the people of God. However, the Jewish people saw, and see, themselves as "a chosen race...a holy nation, God's own people." Early on the Church saw itself as the new Israel – the people who truly believed in Jesus as Messiah; sadly, that meant it also came to see the Jewish people as the 'old Israel' who had lost the covenant. In today's passage the writer uses lots of Old Testament images to describe Christians as the people of God through faith in Jesus. In becoming Israel, they may suffer just as the Jewish people suffered in Biblical history. The author does not muse on what happens to the "old Israel" but in v 12, after today's passage, tells his readers to behave well amongst "the gentiles". Does this mean that his readers were all Jewish Christians or did they include former pagans who now are the people of God? The writer sees Jesus as a living stone, rejected by humans, elect and honoured by God, and the believers as living stones, rejected by their culture, but elect and honoured by God. This new people of God are called with a purpose – to bear witness "to the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." These are words to encourage despondent Christians in times of suffering and persecution. We are not persecuted in the West, we are seen, however, as strange – sometimes as dangerous. How do we respond to the society in which we find ourselves, a society we are both part of and somewhat estranged from? How do we bear witness to God in our age and context?

St John

The passage is a 'farewell discourse' similar in some ways to Moses' in Deuteronomy or Luke's depiction in Luke 22, or Paul's farewell to elders at Ephesus in Acts 20. In common with pagan farewell discourses there was a common pattern – an announcement of an

imminent departure, consolation to followers, directions for the future and a promise of a return. In today's reading we have Jesus speaking of the impact of his death and the promise of a final return. The image of an estate with many buildings to dwell in may echo the Jewish tradition of Hekhalot "palaces" which involve stories of a seer visiting the heavenly realm and exploring different rooms based on the chariot vision in Ezekiel 1 and that may be what Jesus was alluding to. Jesus promised that the bond of love and faith will survive even death. John uses questions to move the themes along. Jesus talks about the place where he is going; Thomas asks the way and we have the famous, and moving, response from Jesus "I am the way, the truth and the life." "I Am" being a divine name. There are three metaphors packed into this short sentence. 'The Way' is full of Biblical imagery most particularly the Exodus from Egypt and the wandering through the wilderness, but we might also think of the journey of Abraham and Sarah from Ur in the Chaldees to Isreal, or the return of the Jewish people from Exile in Babylon. Given this Easter context we might also think of Jesus' long journey to Jerusalem, and beyond, where the disciples walked with him to his impending doom, and of our response to follow that way as we proclaim the Gospel in our lives and loves. Jesus is also 'truth' which we see from the start of John's Gospel and in various interactions John portrays between Jesus and the religious authorities in his work. The entire purpose of Jesus' mission, for John, was to bring 'life' to the world – more, 'eternal life' that is participation in God's own life. Philip's question moves the passage on with his "show us the way to the Father" not realising Jesus is that way, is God's own self embodied: 'whoever has seen me has seen the father'. When dealing with v6, "no one comes to the Father except through me" which provide the base verse for Christian claims of exclusivism you may wish to take care depending on your own theological understandings. For John, Jesus eclipses all other ways to God, even those represented by Moses and the prophets, so his purpose was to proclaim, forcefully, the profound meaning he found in Jesus. Contemporary theology generally would resist any sense that Jewish people are, therefore, displaced from the Covenant and in an age of inter-faith dialogue one needs to be careful in how this verse is dealt with. What might living as people committed to Jesus as the way, truth and life mean for us? What might following Jesus' narrow way mean in an age committed to having anything we want as soon as possible? What might telling the truth mean in an age of lies and fake news? What might Jesus' abundant life offer us in an age addicted to death and decay? The purpose of the passage, I think, is about how to live with faith but without Jesus physical presence; an apt theme in the weeks between Easter and Ascension. The assurance of an ongoing relationship with Jesus, which won't be ended by death, is one way of exploring the theme as is Thomas' age-old question of not knowing what happens after death – Lord where are you going? Life after death is a mystery, yet one where Jesus says he is preparing a place for us.

Weaving the Threads

In Acts we have an inept sermon followed by a moving martyrdom where an unshakeable faith which finds its inspiration in the Psalmist's determination to believe despite defeat and disaster. In 2 Peter we have words drawn from Jewish tradition and ideas turned to sustain Christian believers (who may or may not have been Jewish) in the face of social

rejection and sporadic state persecution and a failure to understand them. In our Gospel passage we have Jesus' words of reassurance that death does not end love and that following him, our way, truth, and life, is the way to find the faith and determination the Psalmist had – even in the face of despondency, defeat, and disaster. We walk Jesus' way, believe in his truthful words, and live the abundant life he offers even though at times it seems as if God is far away. In these days of Easter we ponder faith despite not seeing the Risen Lord for ourselves but holding, in faith, the power and glory of resurrection life.

Affirmation of Faith

In an era of confusion with many competing ideologies,
we believe in Jesus Christ, the Way we follow.

In an age of lies, alternative facts, and contested realities
we believe in Jesus Christ, God's truth for the world.

In a culture fascinated by death and decay,
we believe in Jesus Christ, our life and our hope. Amen

Offertory

Happily not all who follow Christ
are called to witness to his way, truth and life
through the laying down of their lives as martyrs.

All are called, however, to witness through acts of loving kindness,
giving to others of time, talent and treasure,
and that includes giving to the ministry of the Church.

We give in so many ways,

 spending time listening to another's pain,

 helping in practical ways and, of course,

 through our giving of our treasure whether that's in little envelopes, direct to the
 bank or cash on the plate.

So let's give thanks for all that is given in this church.

We bring You are thanks, Eternal Majesty,
for all that is given in this place.

Let us use it, Enfleshed Word, in Your service,
that through the power of the Energising Spirit,
You will renew the face of the earth. Amen.

Intercessions

O Most High,
we live in a time with such pain and confusion!

Like the Psalmist of old we cry to You for deliverance,
from the nets set to ensnare us and from the brokenness of our world.
We pray for all who live in pain;
 victims of war and terror
 those worried where their next meal is coming from
 those homeless and hounded, and all in need.
Help us, who proclaim Your way,
to respond with love, compassion and wisdom.

Lord, in your mercy **hear our prayer.**

O Risen Lord,
we live in a time when truths compete for attention,
when alternative facts fill our airwaves
and when it's hard to know who to trust.
We pray for victims of lying lips:
 migrants and asylum seekers demonised for simply seeking safety,
 victims of abuse and trafficking not believed due to male power,
 scientists highlighting we do to the Earth, our wounded mother.

Help us, who proclaim Your truth,
to respond with love, compassion and wisdom.

Lord, in your mercy **hear our prayer.**

Most Holy Spirit,
we live in an age fascinated by death and decay,
which denies abundant life to the poor and excluded,
yet holds up visions of a wealthy life unattainable to almost everyone;
we pray for those denied fullness of life:
 prisoners who are offered no chance at rehabilitation
 those sentenced to death
 and those deliberately kept poor for evil economic purposes.

Help us, who proclaim Your life,
to respond with love, compassion and wisdom.

Lord, in your mercy **hear our prayer.**

Lord Jesus, You who are our way, truth, and life, hear us as we pray
as you taught saying, Our Father...

Holy Communion

Eternal One,
before the ages began, You called us into being.
You guided our ancestors through fire and cloud,
and, when we lost our way, You sent Your prophets
to call us back to Your way of justice.

Risen Lord Jesus,
we come to this table as Your muddled and stressed disciples,
often confused by the competing voices of our age.
In a world of dead ends and false security, You are the Way —
the path of loving subversion that leads us out of our comfort zones.
In a time of "fake news" and exploitation, You are the Truth —
the Word made flesh who exposes our greed
and challenges the structures that keep the poor in ash heaps.
In the midst of climate rage and wintry despair, you are the Life —
the bringer of life from the places of death, restoring our weary souls.

Most Holy Spirit,
melt the hardness of our hearts.
Hallow these ordinary gifts of bread and wine,
that they may become for us
the communion with the body and blood of Christ.
As we eat and drink, lift us into your presence,
that we may be transformed to see the world as it really is
and find the courage to change it.

For we remember that on the night he was betrayed,
while they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and
after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said,

‘Take, eat; this is my body.’

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying,

‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant,
which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.
I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine
until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.’

And so, Lord Jesus,
as we eat and drink in Your presence,
as a mother feeds her young,
feed us with Your very self,

that we may be made whole,
to follow Your way, believe Your truth and live Your life.

All this we pray through the power of the Holy Spirit,
to the glory of God's Eternal Name,
for ever and ever, Amen.

Post Communion Prayer

Loving God, you have fed us with the Bread of Life
and given us a foretaste of your eternal banquet.
Send us out now –
hands strengthened for service and feet ready to follow -
to be a living witness to your truth and freedom
in an everyday world. Amen.

Blessing

Lord Jesus Christ, as we go,
do not let us stray from Your path, for You are the Way.
Lord Jesus Christ, as we go,
do not let us distrust Your promises, for you are the truth.
Lord Jesus Christ, as we go,
do not let us rest in anything other than you, for you are our life.
Bless us, good Lord,
that our lives may reflect Your life,
our truths be always Your truth,
and our way be always Yours. Amen.

Hymns For Eastertide can be found at
<https://urc.org.uk/your-faith/prayer-and-worship/worship-notes/>