

**Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> April 2021**

**John 20:19-31 (Stop doubting. Believe!)**

**Talk by Laura Polaine, Prayers by Betty Friend (read by Sue Miller)**

Good morning and welcome to St Johns on-line reflection. Today, we will be focusing on John 20:19-31. First, Sue will read the prayers, written by Betty.

**Let us pray:**

Our Almighty and loving Father, we thank you that by your son's resurrection we are given new life in You. We know that when we repent, our sins are forgiven by His death. We thank you for the bible which can be interpreted as basic instructions before leaving earth. I think we all have doubts sometimes, like Thomas; it is at these times that we need to pray and ask questions of mature Christians.

We thank you for all the blessings you give us, not least the gift of the Holy Spirit. In confidence that you hear and answer our prayers we bring our cares and concerns to you.

With the news on Friday that Prince Philip has passed away, we pray for the queen and the Royal Family, giving thanks for the life of Prince Philip, for his love of our country and for his devotion to duty.

Blessed Jesus, Lord of Lords and King of Kings,  
we give you thanks for the life of Philip, Duke of Edinburgh.  
For the grace and mercy he received from you,  
for his faithful love and support of Her Majesty, The Queen,  
and his service to this nation at home and abroad.  
Enfold him in your everlasting arms, grant him rest  
and raise him up at the last in the company of the saints in light. **Amen**

We remember, too, the Royal Family in their bereavement.

O God, our sovereign and shepherd,  
who brought again your Son, Jesus Christ,  
from the valley of death,  
comfort, we pray, The Queen and all the Royal Family  
with your protecting presence.  
Fill them with your Holy Spirit and with your heavenly peace;  
and bring them at the last to your everlasting kingdom;  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen**

We pray for our world, particularly at this time when corona virus has swept the globe. We ask that you will put it on the hearts of the wealthier nations to share the vaccine, so that all can be safe. We ask your mercy on those suffering as a result of conflict, famine, unjust governments and natural disasters. Thinking especially of Indonesia. Yemen, Mozambique and Northern Ireland. Bring peace and reconciliation to these areas. We pray too for the peace of Jerusalem.

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

We pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters. So many governments who claim to have freedom of religion do not have this in practise. We pray for those Christians in Pakistan who face false charges of blasphemy. Those in India who are being attacked and their homes and churches burned. For those in Nigeria who, in addition to being attacked and their homes burned, also face kidnapping and forced marriages to Muslim men. We thank you for the work of charities seeking to support persecuted Christians, and those who are spreading the gospel despite the dangers they face.

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

We pray for our country, especially our government as they seek to steer a tricky path between stopping further spread of covid 19 and the need for people to socialise and to get the economy going. We pray that you will bring peace to Belfast where young people have been caught up in the violence having little idea of what the protests are about. There is frustration across the country as this lockdown has gone on for so long but give us patience. We thank you for a third vaccine being available. Thank you for the scientists who developed these vaccines, and for those who are carrying out the vaccinations.

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

We continue to pray that you will speak powerfully to the person you want to lead St. John's and Holy Trinity. We thank you that through the wonders of zoom, we are getting to know some of the Holy Trinity congregation. We ask your blessing on the upcoming Bible course which will be a joint venture, and I pray that many will sign up and learn more about you. No matter how long we have been a Christian we still have more to learn.

We thank you for the work of Rachel, Lin, Gareth and the volunteers supporting those in trouble with debt, through the CAP centre and we thank you for those who are now debt free. Thank you that the food bank continues its valuable work supporting the CAP clients and vulnerable families at the school.

Lord we pray that we will soon be able to meet together in church. Zoom is great, but we all want to see each other in the flesh, not through a screen. Thank you for the work

of the PCC, Ian, Steve, Andrew and Sue as they keep the essential work of the church going.

So, Lord we ask your blessing on all at St. John's, Holy Trinity and the people of Penge.

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

Let us now join together in the prayer that Jesus taught us

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.**

## **Reading**

Our reading today is taken from John, Chapter 20, verses 19-31. New International Version (NIV)

### **Jesus Appears to His Disciples**

<sup>19</sup> On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." <sup>22</sup> And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

### **Jesus Appears to Thomas**

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be

with you!" <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

<sup>28</sup> Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

<sup>29</sup> Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

### **The Purpose of John's Gospel**

<sup>30</sup> Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

### **Talk**

Have you ever wished you could actually see Jesus? Are there times when you would like to sit down with him and ask his advice. Thomas wanted to see the physical Jesus. In today's passage we see God's plan, that by not limiting himself to one physical body, but through the form of the Holy Spirit, he can be present, for everyone.

The reading begins with Jesus visiting his disciples in the locked room. It is locked as they are fearful of the Jewish Leaders following the death of Jesus. Jesus' first words to them are 'Peace be with you'. Whilst this was a standard Hebrew greeting, the words here are more than a greeting. It is a gift of his kingdom as earlier promised in John (14:27 and 16:33). Jesus then shows them his wounds which is a further fulfilment. Earlier in John 16 it says 'you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy'. Once they see Jesus in the room, the disciples are filled with joy. The world is desperately searching for happiness and peace of mind. Jesus offers us joy and peace through a relationship with him. It is an inner peace that flows from his presence.

In the passage Jesus says 'Peace be with you' three times. The second time is in verse 21 'Again Jesus said 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' Jesus is commissioning his disciples. Firstly, Jesus identifies himself with his Father and tells his disciples by whose authority he did his work, and then he passes the job to them to spread the Good News of salvation around the world. This may have seemed a daunting task, like us being asked to do a job with no support, but Jesus does not ask them to do this in their own strength he equips them. As we are called to do the same work, similarly we do not do this in our own strength, but with the authority that comes from God. As the Father sent Jesus, Jesus sends us. It is in the empowering through the Holy Spirit that equipped the disciples and equips us today. God sent his Son and empowered him with the Spirit. We remember in the Bible when Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit 'the man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit' (John 1:33). Jesus breathed on them and they received the Holy Spirit. When we become Christians we receive the Holy Spirit.

There is life in the breath of God. In verse 23 in the act of Jesus breathing on his disciples we are reminded of the first time in Genesis 2:7, when man was created but did not come alive until God breathed into him the breath of life. Now through the breath of Jesus, in the restoring life of God, he makes new people of the disciples, and gives them the power to do God's will on earth, to offer this new life to the world. Jesus gives them a new sense of purpose. The resurrection is the message of hope for the world. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. There is life beyond the grave. This likewise gives our lives on earth a whole new meaning and purpose to proclaim the message to others through the power of the Holy Spirit. In 1 John 4:13 John writes that one feature of our assurance in Christ is in his gift of the Spirit. 'By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of *his own spirit*'. This is not an impersonal spirit, this is Jesus' himself indwelling in his disciples, in you and me.

Jesus through the Holy Spirit empowered his disciples to preach the Good News about Jesus so people's sins might be forgiven. The disciples did not have the power to forgive sins (only God can forgive sins), but Jesus gave them the privilege of telling new believers that their sins have been forgiven because they have accepted Jesus. All believers have this same privilege. We can announce forgiveness of sins with certainty when we ourselves have found repentance and faith.

In the meeting with Jesus in the locked room, Thomas one of the disciples was not with them and whilst they explain they have seen Jesus he is not convinced and in verse 25 says 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.' What would our reaction have been, if we had been in Thomas's situation, would we have asked for evidence? A week later Jesus appears to them again when Thomas is present and Jesus asks him to 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side.' It must have been a humbling experience for Thomas to be asked. Jesus accepts Thomas just as he is, and accepts his challenge without complaint or criticism. This is an encouragement for us. If we have doubts we do not need to feel guilty. Like Thomas we can be honest about having doubts and bring them to Jesus. If doubts lead to questions, and questions lead to answers, and if the answers are accepted, then doubt has done good work. When Jesus had answered Thomas' doubts Thomas said 'My Lord and my God'. It was a confession of Thomas's heartfelt belief in Jesus.

Thomas did not just want a post death appearance, he wanted to know that the very same Jesus who suffered for him, had pioneered a way through death. He wanted to see the scars. As we go through life we may experience physical injury and from this have scars. Jesus's scars are his war wounds, and are the marks of his suffering love for us.

We may say well, that is okay for Thomas, he got to see Jesus, but what about us? In verse 29, Jesus tells Thomas 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.' The story of Thomas and in his exclaiming

that Jesus is Lord is recorded so that we may believe that 'Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' (verse 31). In his wounds we see the deity. The resurrection is the basis of our hope for life before death, as well as beyond it. The first century Jews were looking for a Messiah, and discovered that it was Jesus. We are all blessed when, without having seen the risen Lord for ourselves, we nevertheless believe in him.

The blessed way to encounter the risen Jesus is not by having a one-off apparition, but to encounter Jesus through the Scriptures. The Bible is for all time. When we have doubts, when we are going through a difficult time, when we have experienced loss, we can always see Jesus, in opening the Bible and seeing him in that scar story. That is how doubting Thomases begin to believe. It's how doubting Thomases go on believing. As we read our bibles we can be expectant to encounter the risen Jesus as we listen to God's Word. We have all the proof we need in the words of the Bible and testimony of believers. A physical appearance would not make Jesus any more real to us than he is now. To understand the life and mission of Jesus more fully we are to study the Gospels. John tells us that his Gospel records only a few of the many events in Jesus' life on earth. But the Good News includes everything we need to know to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, through whom we receive eternal life. There are several ways we can be encouraged to read and understand the bible for example through our Home Groups, and starting next week through the online Bible Course which St Johns and Holy Trinity are jointly running.

We are called to follow Jesus through faith. Many saw Jesus and marvelled, but it was seeing through faith that permitted them to see his glory, to recognize his sonship, to respond to their shepherd's voice. Faith permits a vision, a knowing inaccessible to the person whose sight remains shaped by the world. As C.H.Dodd reminds us *'now that He is no longer visible to the bodily eye, faith remains the capacity for seeing His glory'*. Faith mostly springs from confidence in the works Jesus has done and results in a desire to invest all hope in him.

The resurrection, the Holy Spirit, and faith, each of these links directly to John's Christology, making Jesus himself the centre of our discipleship. Gary Burge summarises this as follows:

1. The resurrection validates Jesus' identity as the Son of God, the divine messenger bringing us truth and grace from God.
2. The Spirit is the indwelling of Jesus-in-Spirit within his disciples, making them his messengers so that like him they will convey to the world God's grace and truth. They (like Jesus) now echo what they 'hear and see' because like Jesus God's Spirit is in them.
3. Faith defines how we live out our lives in the world under the promises and the empowering of God. It supplies us with confidence and hope so that we will not compromise our commitment to Christ despite what we experience in the world.

As we close let us reflect:

May it be that every time we come to the Scriptures we experience it as an 'appearance' of Christ, may we see again his war wounds, may we hear again his word of 'Peace', and may we respond each time in worship, crying 'My Lord and my God.'

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, thank you that you are with us in the form of the Holy Spirit, that we can talk to you, and can find your words to us in the pages of the Bible. Thank you that through this you can be as real to us as you were to Thomas. May we worship you today in awe and reverence.

Amen

**Closing Prayer:** Romans 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen**