

Worship for Sunday 1st May 2022: Third Sunday of Easter

Call to worship

New day, new week, new month....

New hope? New wisdom? New plans?

We come to the place of newness, finding the old ways have shrunk, are no longer fitting for the church of today.

We settle down to worship, only to find the gospel word unsettling, disconcerting, challenging.

We look around, and find others are not quite to our liking.

But there is good news! Although we may not see him yet, and then struggle to recognise him, Jesus is in our midst. If we listen, we hear our names being called. If we look, we see the need he wants us to address. Best of all, if only we can open them, his love will flow into our hearts, and we, once frail, will find ourselves forgiven, and free.

Hymn 411: "Christ the Lord is risen today"

1 'Christ the Lord is risen today',
all on earth and angels say;
raise your joys and triumphs high;
sing, ye heavens, and earth reply.
Love's redeeming work is done,
fought the fight, the battle won;
lo! our Sun's eclipse is o'er;
lo! he sets in blood no more.

2 Vain the stone, the watch, the seal;
Christ has burst the gates of hell:
death in vain forbids his rise;
Christ has opened Paradise.

Lives again our glorious King;
where, O Death, is now thy sting?
Once he died, our souls to save;
where thy victory, O grave?

3 Soar we now where Christ has led,
following our exalted Head;
made like him, like him we rise;
ours the cross, the grave, the skies.
Hail, the Lord of earth and heaven!
Praise to thee by both be given;
thee we greet triumphant now;
hail, the Resurrection thou!

Charles Wesley (1707–1788) (*alt.*)

Prayer

Living God, in the Easter season, we come to you, thankfully. You have given us the gift of life and set before us limitless possibilities. You have enfolded us in your love and reminded us time and again that it is stronger than death. And, often at times when we least expected it, but perhaps, without knowing it, most needed it, you came along beside us in the presence of the risen Christ and walked with us until the end of the day. All of these occasions have brought us joy.

And yet we quickly forget and plunge ourselves into despondency and even despair. We feel we are alone, not understood, rejected, even, just not good enough to receive the abundance of your joy. And then we discover how very merciful you are: you reach out to us to forgive our sins, to cover our mistakes, to lift us up and set us off on a new and better path. Compassionate God, for this, too, we are thankful.

Gracious God, in the Easter season, we come to praise you for the resurrection of Jesus, for his resolve, his determination, his insistence on loving and keeping on loving no matter the cost. We delight, too, in the presence of your Holy Spirit in us, working acts of kindness and justice through us. Through you, our God, who is above and over all, and yet so very close, all things are possible. The weak may find strength, even the hardest of hearts may be softened, and the least likely step up to lead others. Let all right things be done by us, here in the church and in the community, so that your love is made plain in every act.

Amen.

Reading: John 21 verses 1 – 19

Hymn: Lord of life and resurrection

Words by Pat Bennett of Iona Community

1 Lord of Life and Resurrection,
In a graveyard damp with dew,
you bequeathed God's plan and pattern
to a weak and frightened few.
And the message of their story
still today remains the same:
Lives surrendered to God's purpose,
Open up his Kingdom's reign.

2 So I sent my life before you,
all its passion joy and pain
contradictions, strengths and weakness,
to receive your touch again.
Breath your spirit through its textures,
shape its patterns, mend its wrong;
so my dying and my living
may release your Kingdom's song.

3 Take my feet and lead them outward
from the safety I would choose,
to those hard and unknown places
where you want to bring good news.

Take my hands and through their actions
fight injustice, bring release;
by their making and their mending
show your Kingdom's hope and peace.

4 Take my heart and pierce its armour
that true loving may be born,
and my life become a shelter
for those weary, hurt and worn.
Take my mind and quicken insight
Sharpen questions, so I can,
Through the growing understanding
help unfold your Kingdom's plan.

5 Thus in journey and in action

all my loving and my thinking
your true patterning reveal.
May the life which here I offer
Make your Kingdom plain to see;
then what started in the graveyard
will continue on through me.

Sermonette

John 21 verse 6: Jesus said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some."

Tomorrow, it will be one hundred years since my mum, Chris Goldie, was born. One day, when she was too frail for me to make it possible for her, she told me she would have liked to fish. I was quite surprised. It struck me as an unlikely ambition. Thinking about

this last week, it seemed less unlikely. My mum was very patient, loved the outdoors and nature, never measured the quality of life by traditional markers of success, and certainly loved a nice piece of fish – trout, especially, if you were wondering.

Recently, for what I think was the very first time, I saw a man actually land a fish. Walking along the side of Loch Fyne in the village of Cairndow I saw a tug on the line of a man standing on the shore and watched him wrestle it into submission before placing it in a bucket. It's never nice to watch the death of anything, so, although I didn't linger to see what happened thereafter, I wasn't about to come over all self-righteous. Like my late mum, I love a decent fish, and the smoked haddock from the nearby Loch Fyne Oyster Bar is hard to beat, even when I've cooked it myself.

The last time I ate barbecued fish was a lot longer ago, on a beach on the Algarve, as I recall. If the lingering smell of smoked fish cooked in your kitchen is *not* pleasant, the aroma of it cooked outdoors by the sea or lakeside is, in my opinion, heavenly. And why not? Today it is the risen Jesus doing the cooking!

The scene begins rather disconsolately. A curiously assorted group of disciples are sitting talking within sight of the Sea of Galilee, that place so very central to Jesus' ministry. By this time, according to gospel writer John, Jesus has appeared three times: on Easter Sunday morning to Mary Magdalene; to the disciples, minus Thomas, huddled in a locked room on the evening of the same day; and a week later, in the same place, to them all, with Thomas present. John offers the detail that, on this third occasion, the doors were still locked. I find it not too difficult to imagine a tense, uncertain, soul-searching week being endured. The obvious question is, what next? The answer, much less obvious. Peter, never short of an idea (but let's not knock him: at least he had ideas!), has a short-term (or maybe even-long term) solution: **I'm going out to fish.** It seemed like a good suggestion to the others, so they got ready and set sail. It was a fruitless, or at least fishless, night. I can't guess how much more disconsolate they would feel after that. Cold, exhausted, uncertain, defeated, deflated, still probably quite a bit afraid, and, above all, bereaved, grieving and bereft, all they would want to do would be to go home to their families.

Then, in the breaking light of dawn, they sensed, one by one, that they were not alone. Some way up the beach a figure was standing, calmly, looking in their direction, questioning, quizzical. He asked a quite unnecessary question to which the answer was,

I feel, blindingly obvious: **Friends, haven't you any fish?** John gives his readers a sanitised version of what might have been an unprintable answer, a simple, "no". Then the stranger makes a suggestion so preposterous that I'd be surprised if more unprintable stuff didn't follow. **Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.** Nothing worse than being told how to do your job by folk who really haven't a clue about it (believe me!). But they did, and they did. They took the gratuitous advice of the stranger and landed a bumper catch. And, in that moment, they saw who he was.

I discovered an interesting thing, which I suppose I should have known but which had just never previously struck me, as I read in preparation for preaching today: the disciples are never recorded, in any of the gospels, catching a fish without the help of Christ. In Luke's story in his fifth chapter, one which sounds quite a bit like the one we read today, Jesus issues his invitation to his first two disciples, but, just before he does so, he tells Peter to let his net down in deep water. Again, there has been a night's fishing that resulted only in an empty net, and again, Jesus' instruction results in a huge catch. Within a few moments, not only is their net stretched to breaking point, but four guys have new jobs, fishing for something else altogether. More than that, Jesus always seemed to be in command of the sea itself.

By now, of course, the barbecue is ready and, just as they are reaching shore with their catch, they realise: Jesus already has some fish on it. He doesn't wait for theirs. He's ahead, with some of his own, cooking away and filling the fresh sea air with a wonderful smell. There is fresh bread waiting. But then Jesus makes another invitation. **Bring some of the fish you have just caught.** And then, maybe at that moment the most welcome invitation of all: **Come and have breakfast.**

Of course, by this time they know it's him. None of them questioned him, though. They simply took the fish offered, along with the bread. I wonder what they talked about as they sat there with the man they had now seen three times.

While I was wondering, and to let my mind wander before I came back to this sermon, I decided to have a wee, start-of-the-week glance at the Church of Scotland website. And there it was: the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea of Tiberias. And there *she* was: Muriel Pearson, former student, colleague, friend, with whom I and a couple of other colleagues enjoyed a farewell meal last month, before she departed for Israel

Palestine and the post of Associate Minister there. Muriel is a great reconciler. A preacher of sermons of extraordinary beauty (I don't think she learned that from me!), and an English graduate, Muriel just has a way with words, always able, it seems, to find the best ones. She is the right person, I am sure, for a job that will focus on bringing folk together and getting folk from different viewpoints talking. She's out there, naturally, because she felt the call of God. More than that, she believes that God can inspire peace-making and bring people of faith alongside one another. Then I found myself asking this question: will people like Muriel, with her deep, abiding, faith in God, be able to do things politicians can't?

And then I came back here, to the sermon, and to what I had been reading by Thomas Troeger, (in life, professor at Yale University Divinity School). He wrote this: *The original readers and hearers of John's Gospel and the epilogue probably knew the traditions of the disciples having nothing to show for their labours until Christ guided them.* When the reading moves on, it's Peter who is receiving the guidance. It's tough, relentless. Three times, an instruction – no, commandment would be better: **Take care of my sheep.** Thomas Troeger writes again, saying that this incident: *is a dramatic appeal to us not to reduce Christ and the wonders of his ministry to a story in the past, not to leave the gospel in a time and place long ago and far away.* Two thousand years later, a sixty-two year old minister stands on the shores of the same Sea of Galilee and embarks on a new avenue of service in one of the toughest places in the world. Last week, Muriel inspired me to believe that ministry is still possible just so long as I don't believe that Easter is just a story from long ago and far away.

The story in John 21 ends with yet another instruction. By this time, it has got very personal indeed between Jesus and Peter. He has let his eye stray to another of the disciples and started to wonder what Jesus might have in mind for him. He asks: **Lord, what about him.** But Jesus is really having none of it. **what is that to you. You must follow me.** And there's the bottom line. Whether newly minted disciples that first time in the story in Luke's fifth chapter when Jesus helped them with their fishing, or Easter-season disciples disconsolate and at a loss before and after that wasted night's fishing, or Muriel embarking on a new ministry in a place of discord and danger, the right and best things happen when Jesus is giving the guidance and his followers are paying attention, trusting and obeying.

One question, though: here in the erstwhile stultifying safety of Westerton, as we now face a highly uncertain future, where will we be looking: to see what's happening to other people in other places or getting on with the business of following Jesus right here, right now. What other people answer doesn't/won't matter nearly as much as the way we do. There's still time, and opportunity, to take Jesus at his word. Maybe we *will* have the courage to throw our net on the right side of the boat, and then be surprised, in a good way, by what happens.

Hymn 430: Christ is risen while earth slumbers

1 Christ has risen while earth slumbers,
Christ has risen where hope died,
as he said and as he promised,
as we doubted and denied.
Let the moon embrace the blessing;
let the sun sustain the cheer;
let the world confirm the rumour.
Christ is risen, God is here !

2 Christ has risen for the people
whom he loved and died to save;
Christ has risen for the women
bringing flowers to grace his grave.

Christ has risen for disciples
huddled in an upstairs room.
He whose word inspired creation
is not silenced by the tomb.

3 Christ has risen, and for ever
lives to challenge, and to change
all whose lives are messed or mangled,
all who find religion strange.
Christ is risen. Christ is present,
making us what he has been —
evidence of transformation
in which God is known and seen.

John L. Bell (b. 1949) and Graham Maule (. 1958-2019)

Offering

Prayer

God the giver, we dedicate these offerings to you. Along with them, we offer ourselves, praying that any work that might be done by us to help a fellow human being is indeed done by us. Put kind words on our lips, gracious deeds in our minds, and fill our lives with compassionate actions.

God our comforter, be close to those who have as their constant companion the shadow cast by grief, whose gaze is curtailed by clouds of resentment and nursed grudges, whose horizons have come close because illness, frailty or disability make their presence felt in every aspect of their lives.

God of justice, open our eyes wide to the injustices and unfairness that dominates the world. Make those who have plenty generous, and all of us agitated until political, economic, and financial fairness is won. In this week of local elections, we pray for all

who serve on our councils, and for all who seek to be elected. Let them have only the common good in mind.

God of all, we pray for our young ones, sitting exams, planning their futures, worrying about results. We give thanks for parents who guide them and teachers who lead and educate them. Help us to make time and space for them in our lives, and even to remember that we, too, were young once!

Amen.

Hymn 425: The Saviour died, but rose again

1 The Saviour died, but rose again
triumphant from the grave ;
and pleads our cause at God's right hand,
omnipotent to save.

2 Who then can e'er divide us more
from Jesus and his love,
or break the sacred chain that binds
the earth to heaven above ?

3 Let troubles rise, and terrors frown,
and days of darkness fall ;

through him all dangers we'll defy,
and more than conquer all.

4 Nor death nor life, nor earth nor hell,
nor time's destroying sway,
can e'er efface us from his heart,
or make his love decay.

5 Each future period that will bless,
as it has blessed the past :
he loved us from the first of time,
he loves us to the last.

Scottish Paraphrases, 1781 - Romans 8: 34–end

Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you and all those whom you love. Now and always.

Amen.

Hymns, unless otherwise stated: © CCLI Licence No. 174203 and Streaming licences