**Rochdale, Bury & North Manchester Missional Partnership 11th April 2021**

My name is David Watson and I am a serving elder at Bamford Chapel and Norden United Reformed Church, Rochdale. We meet again on line as our church is not yet open due to the continuing Covid restrictions and due also to the building work that has commenced which is causing restricted access to some parts of our building. In spite of this we give you a warm welcome as you either read this or view it on line.

Call to Worship

Lord God, you come to us in Jesus, your first and last word; whenever we gather in his name you are there among us. We rejoice in your presence today. We pray that in our worship you will open our minds and move among us as you speak your word to us.

Let us start our worship as we share our first hymn;

At the name of Jesus

1. At the Name of Jesus 2. Mighty and mysterious

every knee shall bow, in the highest height,

every tongue confess Him God from everlasting,

King of Glory now. very Light of light.

‘Tis the Father’s pleasure In the Father’s bosom,

we should call Him, Lord, with the spirits blessed,

who from the beginning love, in love eternal,

was the mighty Word rest, in perfect rest.

3. Humbled for a season, 4. Bore it up triumphant

to receive a name with it’s human light,

from the lips of sinners through all ranks of creatures,

unto whom He came; to the central height;

faithfully He bore it to the throne of Godhead,

spotless to the last, to the Father’s breast,

brought it back victorious, filled it with the glory

when from death He passed. of that perfect rest.

5. In your hearts enthrone Him; 6. Brothers, this Lord Jesus

there let Him subdue shall return again,

all that is not holy, with His Father’s glory,

all that is not true; with His angel train;

crown Him as your captain for all wreathes of empire

in temptation’s hour, meet upon His brow,

let His will enthrone you and our hearts confess Him

in it’s light and power. King of glory now.

John Ernest Bode (1816 – 1874) ccli 169737 Streaming Licence 595811

Now let us pray together

God says, “You are never too young, never too old to be part of my work. Come near to me all who are weak; all who are afraid; all who know their need of me.” We pray; Lord God, meet us where we are, meet us in our need. We give our lives to you.

We praise you, Lord God, for your love beyond all telling; your kindness without limits; your joy without end. We praise you, Lord God, for forgiveness beyond measuring; mystery past imagining; plans too big for us to see. May we never think that we have got to the end of all that you are; or believe that we can contain the wonder of your presence. We worship you, Lord God, for the promise of new life you give us through the resurrected Jesus.

Father, we thank you for the truth that is in Jesus, and that in him is life in all its fullness; that because of his life, death and resurrection he is our strength, our guide, our teacher and our Lord.

Father we praise you for the confidence we can have in Jesus. In him we are not given a place in which we can hide from life’s problems, but the strength to face each day; you do not provide a crutch to prop up broken lives, but you give us your power to lift us, to hold us and to enable us.

We thank you that Jesus taught us not to trust the way of self-sufficiency, self-satisfaction or power in positive thinking. He called us to trust in the reality of receiving your Spirit, who alone will empower us to live for you.

We praise you that no matter what our days or years may bring or the gifts or abilities we possess, you will walk with us to the end. No matter the faith or the hope with which you fill our lives, you lead us in the way that declares your truth and offers new life to our neighbour.

We ask that the spirit of joy and gratitude may colour every facet of our lives and overflow to touch and change the lives of those around us and bring glory to your name.

We come to you, Lord God, with our doubts, admitting that we are not perfect and that we need your forgiveness; for the times when we have failed to give respect to each other; adults to children and children to adults and each of us to each other; for the times we have hurt each other by hurtful things we have said and done; for the times when we have caused difficulties for others by the things we have not done that we should have done, and for the times when we have failed to speak up for you when opportunities have been there for us to do so. We bring all our faults and shortcomings to the foot of the cross; for we know that there forgiveness begins and reigns for all time.

We are sorry, Lord God, forgive us in Jesus name. Amen.

THE LORD’S PRAYER

And now we pray together the words that Jesus taught his disciples

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name;

Thy kingdom come;

Thy will be done;

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation;

but deliver us from evil,

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory

For ever and ever, Amen

Our second hymn is;

**Open** **our** **eyes**, Lord, we usually sing this through twice

Open our eyes, Lord,

we want to see Jesus -

to reach out and touch Him

and say that we love Him.

Open our ears, Lord,

and help us to listen:

Open our eyes, Lord,

we want to see Jesus!

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We will now have the first of our two readings;

The first reading is John, chapter 20 verses 19 to 31

*Jesus Appears to His Disciples*

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors closed for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After He said this, He showed them His hands and His side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said,”Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me I am sending you.” And with that He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

*Jesus Appears to Thomas*

Now Thomas, (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 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 it.”

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!” 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.”

Thomas said to Him, “My Lord and my God!”

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But they are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And that by believing you may have life in His name.

We will sing our next hymn;

Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us

1. Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us 2. Saviour, breath forgiveness o’er us:

o’er the world’s tempestuous sea; all our weakness Thou dost know:

guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us - Thou didst tread the earth before us,

for we have no help but Thee, Thou didst feel its keenest woe;

yet possessing every blessing lone and dreary, faint and weary,

if our God our Father be. through the desert Thou didst go.

3. Spirit of our God descending,

fill our hearts with heavenly joy,

love with every passion blending,

pleasure that can never cloy:

thus provided, pardoned, guided,

nothing can our peace destroy.

James Edmeston (1791 – 1867) ccli 169737 Streaming Licence 595811

*Address 1*

This morning we are going to look at the continuing happenings around that time that we have come to know as Easter. The disciples had been euphoric on Palm Sunday when Jesus was greeted as ‘king’, and the events of the week leading up to Good Friday and Jesus’ crucifixion must have had their minds in a whirl. But, everything they had hoped for and expected had fallen apart around their ears. In only a matter of days Jesus had been condemned, crucified and sealed in a tomb.

Then there was Easter Day itself; first Mary and then John and Peter had been to the tomb and had found the rock moved and the body of Jesus nowhere to be seen. Mary had even told them that she had seen Jesus, although first off she thought that he was the gardener, that she had spoken to him, and, that she had a message from him to the disciples! What could they make of all this?

We know that they were afraid because our reading from John tells us that they were ‘together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews’. And THEN Jesus comes and stands among them and greets them, “Peace be with you!” He said. They are overjoyed and must have gazed in wonder as Jesus shows them his hands and his side. There is no mistake THIS IS TRULY JESUS!! What an amazing few days!

Jesus speaks to them again repeating the ‘Peace’ and then gives them a commission, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” You could imagine that with all this joy in their hearts that they must surely be ready to dash out and proclaim the risen Lord. “HE’S ALIVE! HE’S ALIVE! HE IS RISEN!!”… But, no, they did not have enough conviction to convince even one of their own. Thomas was missing, he was not there, so how can he believe them when they tell HIM, “We have seen the Lord”. Their words lack the power to bring out a positive response from Thomas, rather the contrary. He tells them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand in his side, “I WILL NOT BELIEVE!” They were not going to fob him off with ‘Fake News’. Was Thomas’ disbelief greater than their belief? We can only guess.

However, we do know that one week later they are still in the house and this time Thomas is with them. Once again we are told that the doors are locked, which shows that they were not yet brimming over with confidence and conviction, and Jesus came and stood among them and greeted them, “Peace be with you!” He then turns his attention to Thomas and invites him to.”Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” And Thomas’ reply rings throughout time and down the ages, “My Lord and my God!” And Jesus chides him over seeing and believing. Thomas’ response is surrender to his Lord and God. If we imagine that Thomas is being chastised by Jesus for wanting to see and touch, the text does not readily support that view. Jesus simply says that those who believe without seeing are blessed (v.29). Not better, just blessed – with the blessing of peace that Jesus brings to these fearful and disrupted disciples. Though risen Jesus retains his woundedness. He is always the crucified-and-risen one. Thomas’ wholehearted response to the risen Jesus is a courageous commitment in a context where challenging the lordship of Caesar resulted in death.

Since then of course Thomas has been dubbed ‘Doubting Thomas’, but really he deserves to be remembered for his faith. Although he was a doubter his doubts had a purpose, he wanted to know the truth. He was not afraid to express his feelings and his thoughts. We find this again as John tells us in chapter 11 of his gospel in the story of Lazarus. When Jesus hears that Lazarus has died he tells his disciples, “Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.” They do not understand so he tells them again but this time he says, “Lazarus is dead, and for you sakes I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe, but now let us go to him.” It is Thomas who speaks up and says to the rest of the disciples, in verse 16 of that chapter, “Let us go, that we also may die with him.” He had faith in Jesus and did not hesitate to tell the others that they should follow Jesus.

Although Thomas refused to believe the other ten disciples, he did not desert them as this is shown by his presence on the occasion of Jesus’ second visit. This shows us that we can live with a doubt without having to live a doubting way of life. Doubt is never meant to be a permanent position, it can be used to pose questions, seek an answer and formulate decisions. Think of doubt as having one foot raised, to step forward or to step backwards, nothing is decided until the foot is placed down on the ground again. Thomas can give us encouragement because we all have doubts from time to time but if like him we take our doubts to Jesus and allow him to bring us back to belief we will like Thomas be able to say, “My Lord and my God”. If you doubt from time to time you are no different from many others who, through countless past years, have travelled the same path. Don’t let doubts bring you down, seek answers and move on. God has provided answers in the past and will continue to do so. Here’s a thought that I came across, ‘Silent doubts rarely find an answer.’ Share your doubts with another believer and let God help you through them.

The second reading is Acts, chapter 2 verses 14a, 22 to 32

*Peter Addresses the Crowd*

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him. David said about Him.

‘I saw the Lord always before me.

Because he is at my right hand,

I will not be shaken.

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;

my body also will live in hope,

because you will not abandon me to the grave,

nor will you let your Holy One see decay.

You have made known to me the paths of life;

you will fill me with joy in your presence.’

“Brothers. I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that He would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was not abandoned to the grave, nor did His body see decay. God raised this Jesus to life, and we are witnesses of the fact.”

*Address 2*

God provided help, in the Holy Spirit, that the disciples needed in order to change them and remove from them the fear that kept them behind locked doors and transformed them into people who went among the crowds and spoke openly of their beliefs. Peter and the other disciples were transformed by their experience of the risen Jesus. The early parts of Acts tell us that Jesus appeared to them over a period of 40 days, building up their knowledge and empowering them through the Holy Spirit. They had witnessed the resurrection of Jesus and they must have continued working and praying together because, when Peter called the believers together to elect a replacement for Judas, the writer of Acts tells us in chapter 1 verse 16 that Peter addressed a group ‘numbering about 120’. Peter said that the replacement should come from those who had been with Jesus from the day of Johns baptism.

So when Peter speaks to this crowd they would be aware of the things that he was speaking about. They have witnessed the miracles, wonders and signs performed by Jesus and he reminds them of these and tells them that they show that Jesus was accredited by God. He assures them that what was done to Jesus, with their help, was by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge. He tells them that God raised Jesus from the dead because it was impossible for death to keep hold of him, and quotes scripture to them to underline his assertion. Not only that but also that they were able to say that they themselves had been witnesses of that fact.

We also cause the death of Jesus, even today, by our sinning, but through the bible we know that all this is forgiven of us if we have faith, repent and believe. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection God provides forgiveness for all. Time and time again we read in the gospels of Jesus’ forgiveness and here are few examples.

Luke records Jesus’ words when on the cross, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Peter was forgiven for denying Jesus three times.

Jesus forgave the sins of the man who was lowered down through the roof and then he healed his paralysis when witnesses accused him of blasphemy.

When invited to condemn a woman caught in the act of adultery, he first caused the crowd to look at their own sinful lives before they stoned her for her sin, and when they walked away he told her that he too did not condemn her and that she should go and sin no more.

We know that only God can forgive sins and when Pilate said to him, “You are a king then!” Jesus stated his deity when he answered, “You are right in saying that I am a king. In fact for this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

Forgiveness is a gift of the forgiver. God’s forgiveness of our sin is therefore a direct gift to each one of us as individuals.

In chapter 3, verses 16 and 17 of his gospel John writes of Jesus telling Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.” This word was not just for Nicodemus but is relevant for each of us today, and for everybody. Nicodemus came at night because he wanted to know more. In effect Jesus is saying to him, stop doubting and believe!

Jesus commissioned his disciples to take the message of forgiveness out into the world; it is no good to anyone keeping it behind closed and locked doors, whether the doors are of an upper room or a church. It is our privilege to carry on this work today, to take every opportunity to tell others of God’s forgiving love in Jesus, and to demonstrate this by the way we live.

Let us put our doubts aside and proclaim to the world;

**Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Amen.

Our next hymn is

Jesus Stand Among Us at the meeting of our lives

Jesus stand among us So to you we’re gathering

at the meeting of our lives, out of each and every land,

be our sweet agreement Christ the love between us

at the meeting of our eyes; at the joining of our hands;

O Jesus, we love you, O, Jesus, we love you

so we gather here, so we gather here,

join our hearts in unity join our hearts in unity

and take away our fear. and take away our fear

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We pray again as we remember others.

Let us pray.

We pray for those for whom the good news of Easter is just too good to be true; for those who long to believe, but are looking for proof when none can be given, except to the eye of faith; for those who will only accept what can be seen, touched or scientifically confirmed; for those who dare not believe because of the challenge to their whole way of thinking and the changes it would require them to make to their whole way of living.

May the risen Christ touch their hearts with his grace.

We pray for those who can go no further; for those who have lost confidence and courage; for those for whom hope is gone and joy has withered away; for those for whom life no longer holds any promise and each day is a burden too much to bear; for those who are ill … in a time of silence we name before you Lord those we hold in our hearts, … we pray for those who are dying and for those who have the care of the sick and dying; for those who mourn the loss of one held dear; for those whose lives are empty, and with the passing years have lost meaning; for the lonely, alone and confused.

May the risen Christ give them peace.

We pray for the church and for all Christians; for those who live in the dark and fearful places in the world and in particular for those killed and injured because of their faith; for those facing pain and the evil intentions of others; for those who are living and worshiping as if Christ is not risen but still in the tomb; for those who have never experienced the joy, the freedom and the power that raised Christ from the dead and for whom faith means hanging on by the skin of their teeth. We pray for those seeking answers to the meaning of life, solutions to their problems and an assurance of God’s real presence, but will not risk looking for them in the empty tomb.

May the risen Christ transform their hearts.

We pray for our world and for those filled with hatred and despair; for those who never smile, never laugh, never cry; for those who simply exist when God intended them to live a full life; for those who seek instant pleasure rather than risk opening their lives to the power of Christ; for those whose lives are ruined as they clothe their existence with addictions that promise everything now, for a moment; and for those who never hear God’s offer of life in abundance and his promise of heaven because we do not tell them.

May the risen Lord open blind eyes and sealed lips.

We pray for someone we know who needs to know that they are forgiven; for someone who longs to be free; for someone we know who is empty; for someone who is frightened, hurting or just on their own; for someone who wants to know that God is real and that he is always with them; for someone at home, at school or a neighbour.

May the risen Christ stay with them, and bring his peace.

We pray for ourselves. Lord, give us a new joy in your presence and a new awareness that you are alive. Give us the courage to name your name with our lives and our lips. So fill us, we pray, with your joy and your power, and with your love and your grace, with a trust in your dying and an experience of your rising, that our doubts may be quashed and that our lives will simply overflow for your glory. May we have the joy of leading someone to the foot of the empty cross to find their saviour and to the empty tomb to discover their Lord.

We ask our prayers in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen

Our final hymn is;

What a Friend we have in Jesus

1. What a friend we have in Jesus, 2. Have we trials and temptations?

All our sins and griefs to bear! Is there trouble anywhere?

What a privilege to carry We should never be discouraged:

everything to God in prayer! Take it to the Lord in prayer!

O what peace we often forfeit, Can we find a feiend so faithful,

O what needless pain we bear - who will all our sorrows share?

All because we do not carry Jesus knows our every weakness -

everything to God in prayer! Take it to the Lord in prayer!

3. Are we weak and heavy-laden,

cumbered with a load of care?

Precious Saviour, still our refuge!

Take it to the Lord in prayer!

Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?

Take it to the Lord in prayer!

In His arms He’ll take and shield thee,

thou wilt find a solace there.

Joseph Scriven (1819 – 1886) ccli 169737 Streaming Licence 595811

As we come to the close of our service I invite you after the benediction to share with me and with each other in the words of the doxology.

Benediction

Generous God, thank you for being with us today.

In this coming week help us to remember what we have heard, said and sung.

Remind us daily that, just as Peter did, we need to share our love of you with others.

Be with each one of us, and all those we love, this week and always. AMEN

Doxology

**May God’s blessing surround you each day,**

**As you trust him and walk in his way.**

**May his presence within guard and keep you from sin,**

**Go in peace, go in joy, go in love**