**Sunday 18th April 2021**

***Welcome and opening words***

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to join you this morning. I’m Linda Rayner, I work for the URC, looking at new ways of being church for the 21st century. It’s interesting work, especially now, as churches think about going back, and ask what might be a ‘new normal’.

Like so many people, I’ve been enjoying the outside recently – I’m blessed to be able to walk, and I’m blessed in that – like you – I live close to some stunning countryside. In my case, I live close to the Peak District, so in the year of lockdown, I have wandered many miles, almost all from my own front door, delighting in nature, and now, once again delighting in the abundant signs of Spring and the opportunity to thank God for such treasures in such strange times.

*Even on the cloudiest days, God’s light and warmth pours through to us – and now, as Spring is with us, we delight in the joy of new life.*

\*Pouring out with light and warmth,  
God's love floods the darkest places of the world,  
with immeasurable and endless love.  
The world is soaked in God,  
and joy penetrates cold soil and hearts,  
bringing life and joy.  
  
Responding to the living light,   
that darkness will not subdue,  
the earth replies in generous kind,  
and offers its love.  
  
And so our hearts too,  
called now to love and praise,  
respond in eager voice,  
and sing and celebrate, and worship  
our abundant, generous God.   
**Amen.**

Let’s sing to remind ourselves that Jesus is with us even if we are sitting in front of a screen, on our own or in our bubbles – Jesus *is* here – with us, just as he was with his friends who couldn’t quite take it all in.

**Hymn:** As we are gathered Jesus is here – Mission Praise 38

As We Are Gathered Jesus Is Here  
One With Each Other, Jesus Is Here  
Joined By The Spirit, Washed In The Blood  
Part Of The Body, The Church Of God  
As We Are Gathered Jesus Is Here  
One With Each Other, Jesus Is Here

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**Let’s bow our heads and pray**

Loving God, as we join together to worship you this morning, we thank you for the week that has just passed. For some of us, it has been a week of fun and great delight as we start to venture out and make our way along the road to a new normal. For some it has been a week of sadness, whilst for others it has been quiet and just working at whatever we have to do. But we have all done things we shouldn’t have done, said things we shouldn’t have said, or kept quiet when we should have spoken-out.

Sometimes we know we should treat our friends and neighbours a little bit better, so that other people can see that we are your friends, but we don’t always manage and we are sorry.

*(Pause as we bring our own confessions to God)*

Lord, we know that you have heard us saying sorry.

And we know that – yet again – you forgive us and set us gently on the right path so that we can try again.

**Amen**

Say together the words 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**.

**Introduction to the theme: How are you feeling today?**

It’s one of those questions that we ask, but do we always listen to the answer? I think sometimes we know what the answer will be before we even ask – some of our friends and family answer with an automatic ‘everything’s fine thank you’, whilst others might tell you the long and complicated truth. I suspect we’re all feeling slightly frayed around the edges after a year of uncertainty and peculiar rules. Some of us are feeling sad, some of us are keen to be allowed off the leash and out with our friends. Some feel frightened, some feel thrilled, some cautious and some quite gung-ho and excited.

Have you sat outside a pub yet? Had friends round to meet in the garden? Walked with two households?

I’m certainly looking forward to a bit of normality, and feeling quite hopeful that we can begin to head for some kind of normality, albeit different to anything we’ve known before.

This last year more than ever, we’ve been encouraged to share our feelings, protecting our mental health and making sure that we are genuinely feeling OK.

How we feel about a situation shapes our response to it – so if we feel excited, our response will be quite different to if we’re frightened, overwhelmed, or not particularly bothered.

As Christians in the 21st century, this is something we see as we try to share our love for Jesus with people who don’t come to church. If we feel enthusiastic, and excited, we’re already part-way there – people pick-up on our feelings and they too can feel the same.

We have two Bible readings this morning, each one could potentially evoke a range of feelings and emotions.

As you read, or listen to the first story from Luke, notice how many words are included about feelings? How did the disciples *feel* at that moment? If you were there at the time, what emotions might *you* have felt? You might like to make a note of some of the words that are used to describe the emotions.

Our second reading is quite different. As you listen or read the words of James, try to imagine that you are part of one of the churches that James is addressing. How might you have felt then? How do his words speak to us today? How does that make us *feel*?

However, before we come to the readings, we’re going to sing again – a song that is filled with emotions evoked by our knowledge of God – again, look out for the words about feelings – ‘…rest…’, ‘joy’, ‘wonder’ and that is just the first verse. The third verse is slightly different – it’s about our response to God. How does this verse make you feel?

Let’s sing together:

**Hymn:** What a faithful God have I – Mission Praise 1087

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| --- | --- |
| 1. Lord, I come before Your throne of grace I find rest in Your presence, And fullness of Joy In worship and wonder, I behold Your face Singing what a faithful God have I | *Refrain*  What a faithful God have I What a faithful God What a faithful God have I Faithful in every way |
| 1. Lord of mercy, You have heard my cry Through the storm you’re the beacon My song in the night In the shelter of Your wings Hear my heart’s reply, Singing what a faithful God have I | 1. Lord, all sovereign Granting peace from heaven Let me comfort those who suffer With the comfort You have given I will tell of Your great love For as long as I live Singing what a faithful God have I |

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**Introduction to the first Bible reading**:

The story that we’re about to hear may be familiar. This is just after Jesus has walked with his friends on the road to Emmaus, but if you recall, they didn’t recognise him as they all chatted – in fact, they only recognised him as he broke the bread with them at the dinner table. Then he disappeared and they ran back to Jerusalem to tell their other friends.

That’s no mean feat! It was about 7 miles to Jerusalem from Emmaus – and they’d already walked the distance once.

So we find them having just arrived back – filled with excitement and quite exhausted, locked in a room with their friends:

Let’s hear the story, as Jesus suddenly appears:

*Luke 24 36b-48 (NIV)*

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”  They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.

He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?”

They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

You are witnesses of these things.

Amen

**Introduction to the 2nd reading:**

These words are from James, the brother of Jesus. In the New International version, the previous passage is headed, ‘Favouritism is forbidden’, whilst this passage is headed ‘Faith and Deeds’.

James makes it clear how Jesus’s friends are expected to live. His words are quite stark:

*James 2: 14-18*

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.

If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

**Message**

There are so many emotions in that first reading from Luke. How many did you count?

‘Startled’, ‘frightened’, ‘troubled’, ‘doubt’… then ‘joy’ and ‘amazement’, those people were in absolute turmoil, and so Jesus did something to calm them down. He asked for some food, and proceeded to eat a very ordinary piece of fish. They had struggled so much to understand Jesus in the last few months as he quoted from their Scriptures – our Old Testament – proving again and again that he was indeed the Messiah. I think they tried to believe, but they really, really struggled. So here he was, eating fish and being absolutely normal and then explaining yet again. How must it have felt to be there in that room?

What about the two people on the road to Emmaus? I can’t help wondering, did they feel *guilty* for not recognising Jesus?

Do you think they felt anything apart from delight and astonishment? What about the others who couldn’t quite believe he’d risen, even when he was with them in the room? Do you think they felt guilty for their unbelief, or just delight that Jesus was there?

I wonder how would we feel if we walked along the road, chatting with Jesus, yet failed to recognise him – especially when we’d been part of the main group of friends for the past almost 3 years? Travelling with him and sharing so many experiences and then failing to realise who it was?

I don’t know about you, but I reckon I’d have felt dreadful for not realising it was Jesus. It’s bad enough when I can’t remember someone’s name (and I am terrible for that!), but to fail to recognise at all someone I know so well…I think I’d want the ground to swallow me…beam me up… find myself a way out as fast as possible.

It’s a thought that stays with me whenever I hear the story of the Emmaus Road. How did everyone feel at that time?

Some considerable time after the events of the Emmaus Road and the earthly sightings of the risen Jesus, James wrote to early Jewish Christians who were dispersed around the known world. This was at least 30 years after Jesus was crucified (though some say much later), and James wrote to encourage his readers to ‘*live* what they *say* they believe’.

I think this is the message of discipleship for us today as 21st century Christians. It’s at the crux of being a missional disciple. We have to be *seen* as active Christians and that means *being* Christians, not just talking about being Christians! As people see our Christian behaviour, they ask to join-in. It’s hard work, we can’t stop being Christians for even a moment, because we must *be* the Christians we say we are in order to be recognised as such.

It’s what it means to be ‘Jesus Shaped’. People need to be able to recognise us as Christians in the same way as Jesus’s friends recognised Jesus himself on the Emmaus Road, or in the locked room –because of something he did, or the way he did it . We need to make people who don’t come to church feel welcome, warm and good and we can only do this by being genuine, doing ordinary things with kindness, like Jesus did when he did something so very ordinary as eat a piece of fish. Calming the anxiety and creating an atmosphere where people feel safe to ask questions.

There are numerous examples of churches coming out of the buildings in lockdown and *being* Christians for their communities. I work with the Methodist Church in Cheadle Hulme, not very far South from here. They started collecting for the local foodbank in the carpark. Nothing spectacular, but they have been there week-in-week-out for over a year, taking two big cars full of products to the foodbank each time - and just last week, a local councillor said that it’s wonderful to work with a ‘truly active Christian Church, that is doing what you’d expect church to do’. Two people who are not church members have joined the rota of volunteers at the collection ‘because the welcome was so warm’. They’ve seen Christianity at work, they’re recognising that these are Christians and they’re liking what they see. It’s like the story in Matthew: ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ Of course we don’t know who might come to Jesus through seeing what we’re doing, we might not recognise them, so we must make all-the-more effort to make them welcome.

Being a missional disciple in the 21st century is a huge responsibility. It’s about living out our faith all day every day, sharing, caring and being like Jesus for people outside of the church, and most of all being recognisably a Christian – Jesus shaped - at all times. Jesus was recognisably himself and we must be recognisably Jesus shaped.

I guess that stirs up a whole range of emotions and feelings, from intrepidation to delight and perhaps most important of all… excitement.

It’s all very well to talk about faith, but – as James said - …’I will show you my faith by my deeds’

Will people recognise me as a Christian because of what I DO?

Can we be recognised as a church because of what we DO?

**Amen**

**Prayer**

Jesus, you walked with people and they didn’t know you.

Help us to recognise you in other people, all the time.

You encouraged your friends with a genuine, extraordinary display of genuine ordinariness.

Help us to be genuine *and* ordinary as we help our friends believe in you.

You call us to care for others as you cared for everyone.

Help our caring ways to demonstrate our faith and encourage others to come to you.

**Amen**

Our next hymn gives us an insight into how Christians might change the world as together we work to change Beauty for Brokenness.

**Hymn:** Beauty for brokenness – Mission Praise 806

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| 1. Beauty for brokenness Hope for despair Lord, in the suffering This is our prayer Bread for the children Justice, joy, peace Sunrise to sunset Your kingdom increase! | 1. Shelter for fragile lives Cures for their ills Work for the craftsman Trade for their skills Land for the dispossessed Rights for the weak Voices to plead the cause Of those who can't speak |
| *Refrain*  *God of the poor Friend of the weak Give us compassion we pray Melt our cold hearts Let tears fall like rain Come, change our love From a spark to a flame* | 1. Refuge from cruel wars Havens from fear Cities for sanctuary Freedoms to share Peace to the killing-fields Scorched earth to green Christ for the bitterness His cross for the pain |
| 1. Rest for the ravaged earth Oceans and streams Plundered and poisoned Our future, our dreams Lord, end our madness Carelessness, greed Make us content with The things that we need   *(Refrain)* | 1. Lighten our darkness Breathe on this flame Until your justice Burns brightly again Until the nations Learn of your ways Seek your salvation And bring you their praise   *(Refrain)* |

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**Prayers for other people**

Lord, we pray for people who can’t recognise you

Those who don’t know you

We pray that you will open their hearts to your love.

We pray for your world: Lord, be with the leaders as they wrestle with so many huge issues. May they show fairness and consideration, listening to each other and responding with love and care.

We pray for those who mourn: families and people we know, our friends, our relatives. Lord at this time especially we pray for Queen Elizabeth and the Royal Family as they continue to grieve the loss of Prince Philip. Let them feel your presence and the comfort that only you can offer as they face publicity when they would almost certainly wish for solitude.

Lord, we pray for our churches: as some buildings reopen, we pray for diligence, kindness and compassion as we try to adhere to the rules, whilst comforting those who mourn the old ways.

We bring our prayers for our families and friends, for those who are struggling with illness, those affected by Covid, those who struggle financially, those who face isolation and loneliness.

Lord, we ask for you to intercede for everyone who is having a tough time at the moment, Be with them all and grant them your peace

Finally we pray for ourselves as we try to share our faith – be with us Lord at all times, help us to know your loving presence and show us how to share our deep belief in your love for us.

**Amen**

**Closing hymn:** Christ be our light - Mission Praise

Let’s sing together our final hymn today – asking Jesus to guide us in our missional journey. Christ, be our light.

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| 1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness Longing for truth, we turn to You. Make us Your own, Your holy people Light for the world to see. | *Refrain:*  Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness. Christ, be our light! Shine in Your church gathered today. |
| 1. Longing for peace, our world is troubled Longing for hope, many despair. Your word alone has power to save us. Make us your living voice.   *(Refrain)* | 1. Longing for food, many are hungry Longing for water, many still thirst. Make us Your bread, broken for others Shared until all are fed.   *(Refrain)* |
| 1. Longing for shelter, many are homeless. Longing for warmth, many are cold. Make us your building, sheltering others, walls made of living stone.   *(Refrain)* | 1. Many the gifts, many the people, many the hearts that yearn to belong. Let us be servants to one another, making your kingdom come.   *(Refrain)* |

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**Blessing**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore.

Amen

*\*These words are adapted from an unknown author.*