

VE People

Call to worship

At times it can be difficult to look forward in hope, to face the future, to trust that God is working for us. But in this space, God is with us. Offering us a glimpse of heaven, a teaser of what is to come. So, however difficult, however challenging, however uncomfortable, put your trust in God and worship him. God is good.

Prayer

Creator God, maker of all that is seen and all that is hidden; I come here in this place and time to worship and adore you. May my home on earth be a reflection of your heavenly home. May my doors always be open in welcome, may my love be shared with all people, may my worship and praise be honest and true. As I seek to follow in the way of Jesus, may others see you in me as the disciples saw you in Jesus.

Merciful God, I am sorry for the times when I fail you, for the times when I turn from your way to follow my own path. I am sorry for the times that I misunderstand or disregard your will for me. I come humbly before you today and ask for your forgiveness. Help me to accept your free offer of forgiveness and put me back on the right pathway. Lead me to your kingdom here on earth and help me as I assist you in its creation. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen

Reading: John 14:1-14 -The Message (MSG) by Eugene Peterson

The Road

“Don’t let this throw you. You trust God, don’t you? Trust me. There is plenty of room for you in my Father’s home. If that weren’t so, would I have told you that I’m on my way to get a room ready for you? And if I’m on my way to get your room ready, I’ll come back and get you so you can live where I live. And you already know the road I’m taking.”

Thomas said, “Master, we have no idea where you’re going. How do you expect us to know the road?”

Jesus said, “I am the Road, also the Truth, also the Life. No one gets to the Father apart from me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him. You’ve even seen him!”

Philip said, “Master, show us the Father; then we’ll be content.”

“You’ve been with me all this time, Philip, and you still don’t understand? To see me is to see the Father. So how can you ask, ‘Where is the Father?’ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you aren’t mere words. I don’t just make them up on my own. The Father who resides in me crafts each word into a divine act.

“Believe me: I am in my Father and my Father is in me. If you can’t believe that, believe what you see - these works. The person who trusts me will not only do what I’m doing but even greater things, because I, on my way to the Father, am giving you the same work to do that I’ve been doing. You can count on it. From now on, whatever you request along the lines of who I am and

what I am doing, I'll do it. That's how the Father will be seen for who he is in the Son. I mean it. Whatever you request in this way, I'll do.

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### Victorious Easter People

As I pen this sermon/service today is 8th May 2020, the 75th anniversary of VE day and my guess would be that for anyone over 80 years of age, you may have recollections of this day 75 years ago.

In London, Victory in Europe Day took place on the banks of the Thames and people had been allowed a day out in the capital, joining the hundreds of thousands of people celebrating. One report from a 96 year old lady was how she recalled it being a pleasant, sunny day. There was dancing and drinking, and people were waving flags. People singing the Dame Vera Lynn song "We'll Meet Again" and songs by Glenn Miller. She said it was really quite extraordinary and without



being there it is quite difficult to explain. Caroline told me she once asked her mum, who then lived in Bristol what she did on VE day, and her mum said, she just cried and I think this come from the same remembrance of the 96 year old lady, "it was a feeling of tremendous relief mixed with great sadness at the loss of loved ones".

As we all know this should have been the May long weekend with celebrations up and down the country to remember the VE day, but all this has been cancelled due to the lockdown for the coronavirus. However, it is still important that we do remember the 75th anniversary of VE Day, because the sacrifices made to get there were quite incredible. VE day came after 5 years and 8 months of terrible conflict across Europe.

I have sometimes wondered what went through people's mind then, when month by month since September 1939, the war intensified, soldiers died, cities were bombed and ever increasing the death rates rose. For the generations since 1945 it may well be asked, when have so many people, everywhere, felt so uncertain, had so many unanswered and unanswerable questions all at the same time? When have so many plans been upended, suspended? When have so many guidelines been provisional, temporary, subject to revision? How long will this crisis last? When will we get to go out or gather or travel or work normally or work at all, hug and feel safe again? Grief, illness, this unseen virus with its terrible tentacles that reach into our homes, churches, schools, hospitals, economy all leave us feeling unmoored, untethered, adrift, even more than we often do as

humans. We may feel suspended, unable to get a foothold on something solid and dependable, concrete and unshakeable. Everything feels like it is all up in the air.

Here is the message of our reading today. Yes, the feeling of uncertainty is real. Yes, the feeling of being off course without our regular patterns and way-markers is real. Yes, the longing for something unmovable yet life-giving, solid yet sustaining, concrete yet creative, is real. And yes, God gives us a way that is steadfast when all feels like sinking sand, a truth that is certain when all feels slippery, a life that is assured when all is shifting. God gives us precisely what we need for this moment and for all time, because God gives us Jesus and makes us into a people. Our reading today bears witness to this assurance, this place to get a foothold, this pledge of security no matter what.

In fact the reading would also draw us to reflect on what it means to be community. We each have our own communities that we come here from, when we can gather to worship each Sunday, but we are also part of the larger community of the Christian faith - a community in which we can gather and from which we can gain wisdom, rejuvenation, and identity. Within each of our larger units of community, there are smaller ones, such as our families, our friendship circles, our schools, our churches, and our workplace communities. We define these in very particular ways. But this way of defining a community is not a new thing that we in contemporary society invented. It has been going on from the time people could group together to share the responsibilities and burdens of survival. Identity in tribal cultures came from community, not from individual accomplishments. One thing that tribes knew is that they were stronger together and that to go off alone, you would eventually lose your mind or die. Going back to my 96 year old lady recalling the events from WWII and the situation we are facing today, she said, "It reminds me of the war days, everybody helping everyone else, in the main, a tremendous feeling of camaraderie." Community togetherness.

In Jesus' time, people identified themselves with being Jewish or Roman or Samaritan or one of the many other cultures and nations that were intermingling under Roman conquest. Jesus himself was Jewish and worked within the framework of being Jewish to call people back to God. As I said last weekend, we are still in the season called Easter and when we celebrate Easter, we celebrate a very particular definition of what it means to be community: We are the people who believe in the God who has been revealed to us decisively in Jesus Christ. As we say in Communion liturgy, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." This separates us as a community, just as it separated the community for whom the Gospel of John was written.

John did not write his gospel in one sitting, but instead over time, addressing the developing religious and pastoral needs of a particular community. We don't know exact times, but given the evidence of what was happening in the social and historical context, we can understand this Gospel as originating in an early Christian community struggling to separate itself from first century Judaism, sometime between 75-100 CE. The religious turmoil within emergent Judaism after 70 CE, when the Jewish temple was destroyed, is critical. John's gospel focus was about "the Jews" and its prediction of expulsion, persecution, and martyrdom for believers, readily displaying the intra-Jewish conflict of the time. John's community saw themselves to be a persecuted religious minority, expelled from the synagogue, their religious home, because of their faith in Jesus.

Of course, there were other religious beliefs swirling around during that time. The early Christians were also living within a Hellenistic (Greek) society with its principles, ideas, and pursuits

associated with the contemporary Greek culture permeating the Mediterranean world. John's gospel is also influenced by this fact.

So as we can see, John's gospel was written to a particular community in a particular time and place so that they could define themselves apart from the other religions that were around them and so helped define them early Christian believers as a community. Things haven't changed much since then. We have different religions and philosophies swirling around us in this modern age, too. So how do we define ourselves as Christians now? How do we live as Easter people?

Defining ourselves means that we live out our lives in a particular way as community so that people can clearly see what being a Christian means. Jesus helps us to define our identity, when he spoke in one of his great "I am" sayings. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." With Jesus, we have sure footing. With Jesus, there is a way forward. We may not see the next step, but he does, and if we stay close, follow him, and depend on him, we can move forward undergirded by the unmovable, unshakeable, unshifting ground that supports us, the guide that won't leave us, the God who won't lose us.

Jesus assures us that if we know him, we know the one he calls Father, also. God is not capricious, aloof, or beyond the troubles of this world. God is knowable because Jesus is knowable. What does this tell us about God? The God we know in Jesus Christ became flesh and dwelt among us, made a home among the poor, cared for the sick, lived humbly, fed the hungry, blessed children, washed the feet of his disciples, wept at the death of his friend, promised that death will not be victorious, met his disciples even when they had isolated themselves in an upper room, went ahead to prepare a place for us, and will come and take us to himself, that where he is, we may be also. God is with us, even in our vulnerability, our uncertainty, our failing and fear. God is here. Take a step forward on the way. Our footing is sure. The path holds. The way leads to life.

There is a phrase that Jesus uses here, over which some people trip: "No one comes to the Father except through me." Don't let that make you stumble. Do not imagine Jesus the Way as constructed of paving stones that can be pried up and used as projectiles against our neighbours. Jesus is describing his power, his ability to overcome both our inability and our pride as they relate to our faith. He is reminding his followers that none of us makes our own way to God. We aren't earning a way to God by our faith or our practice or how strongly we believe in Jesus. We aren't succeeding in something that people of other faiths are failing at. That's not the point here, but rather though we are weak, Jesus is strong. Though we get distracted, Jesus stays focused. Though we stumble, Jesus holds onto us.

Jesus was talking to people whose families thought they might be crazy for following him. He was talking to people who were risking their livelihoods and lives to call him Saviour. He was talking to people who were worried about the consequences of Jesus' reputation rubbing off on them - Jesus' reputation as someone who disturbed the status quo, who associated with the wrong people, who got lifted on a cross instead of climbing a ladder, whose death proved that innocence isn't a guarantee against suffering, whose resurrection proved that death isn't the end of the story, whose ascension to God's right hand means that there is nowhere now that scarred and frail human flesh cannot be taken, and live, even in the very presence of God, whose whole life proved that nothing is stronger than the God who is Love.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life." Keep going. The footing is sure. The path is solid. You cannot get lost. God won't let you go. Jesus offers assurance that following him is the way to know God, the way to an abundant life, the way to peace and joy, no matter our circumstances.

Following Jesus is not crazy, a waste of time, or a dead-end road. Jesus is the way. Stay on the path and keep going. God gives us a way that is steadfast when all feels like sinking sand, a truth that is certain when all feels slippery, a life that is assured when all is shifting because God gives us Jesus, to be the Way for us.

In these times, I believe this passage from John's Gospel gives us an answer. We know the way to the place that Jesus is going because we, by definition, claim to know Jesus as God incarnate - God with us. Jesus was always going to return to God the Father because they were inseparable. Jesus himself was and is simultaneously the access to and the embodiment of life with God. This is our particular belief that helps define us as a Christian community and because of this belief, we are to love Jesus by doing his works and by keeping his commandments: love God and love one another.

This is what will define as Christian community. We are Jesus people, we are Victorious Easter (VE) People. "If someone were to stop at the corner shop and ask where our church was, how would the shop keeper answer?" Would they look at them blankly? Give a vague answer? Or would he or she say, "Oh, that church! That's the church where this, this, and this happens!" What is our identity in the wider community? What do we want to be known for? Even in these days of uncertainty – one thing is certain, Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and if we walk in his way we will be VE People.

## **Prayer**

I bring to you, merciful God, my concerns for myself and for others. I pray for those who find themselves caught between the need to let go and the desire to hold on. I pray for those that are lonely that they might find a companion in you. I pray for the bereaved that in their sorrow they might be aware of your presence sustaining them. I pray for those who struggle with addiction, that you Lord, would give to them the strength and support they need to battle their addiction and to overcome it. I pray for those whose lives have become diminished because of illness, or age that they may be conscious of your life within them, a life which continues to deepen and strengthen, even in the face of human weakness.

I pray for those who feel the weight of the responsibilities they carry, at home at work or in the church. For those in positions of leadership, locally or nationally, that they may exercise influence for the good of others and not for selfish ends. I pray for the church of Jesus Christ throughout the world, that we might be obedient in our discipleship, joyful in our witness and patient in times of difficulty. May my life speak of the grace of God in such a way that others may hear and come to know friendship with God that I have found through Jesus.

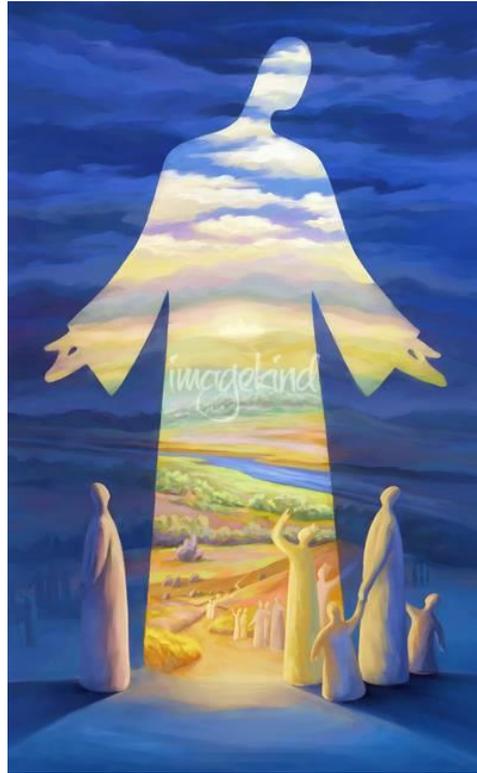
Heaviness may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning. Lord God you have been our refuge and our strength and present help in time of trouble. I today give thanks too for the opportunity to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe, when the sounds of war fell silent on this continent. I come conscious of our need for God's forgiveness for the sin and the desire to dominate others that leads to conflict between people, and war between nations. As I remember the many soldiers, sailors and airmen who gave their lives restraining evil and opposing tyranny, so I also come in thanksgiving for the years of peace that the nations of Europe have enjoyed since the Second World War. I gather joyfully today, as those who gathered on that first Victory day, glad of each other's company and grateful for the laughter and love that follows times of sadness and loss, but above all things, I pray that your will, Father God, may be done on earth as it is in heaven, as I join my voices with many others to say: Our Father .... Amen.

A great and well-loved hymn, set to the Welsh tune, Cwm Rhondda – written by William Williams (1717-1791) in Church Hymnary 4, number 167

Guide me, O thou great Redeemer,  
pilgrim though this barren land;  
I am weak, but thou art mighty;  
hold me with thy powerful hand;  
Bread of heaven,  
feed me now and evermore.

Open now the crystal fountain,  
whence the healing stream doth flow;  
let the fiery cloudy pillar  
lead me all my journey through;  
strong Deliverer,  
be thou still my Strength and Shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,  
bid my anxious fears subside;  
bear me through the swelling current,  
land me safe on Canaan's side;  
songs of praises,  
I will ever give to thee.



**Blessing:**

Many mansions, many ways of knowing God. Many routes to unravelling the mystery of love and eternity. Too much for me to understand. Way, truth and life, so much bigger than I could ever imagine. The breadth of God's love revealed in Jesus and mine for the asking.

As I leave this time and step back into my world, choosing which direction to head in, whichever way I go, let me go there with your blessing God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, guiding, loving and inspiring me. Amen.