

Dear friends

I hope you are all keeping well, and not finding the current situation too testing. I am learning how much I have to be thankful for in living where I do, which makes the restrictions on movement far more bearable than it must be for many. I'm enclosing again the Gospel reading for today, together with a reflection and some prayers, that I hope you may find helpful. I'm grateful for the feedback that folk have given to these, and I am very open to suggestions of other ways in which we can keep connected with each other, and share resources to help us in prayer and worship during this time, especially as it looks like it will be a little while before we can resume services in church.

Do please continue to pray especially for those who have been bereaved, and I know that it has been much appreciated that, when funeral services have necessarily been very limited in who can attend, families have known the prayerful support of others. The funerals scheduled over the next weeks are:

Alan Bridgewater on 22 April at 11am

Ernest Rivers on 22 April at 2pm

John Grimes on 24 April at 3.30pm.

As ever, don't hesitate to get in touch, whether with news or questions, or just for a chat.

Love

John

### **Readings, Reflections and Prayers**

#### **Reading John 20.19-end**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked 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. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do

not doubt but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

### **Reflection**

“The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.” One of the things with reading the Bible is that familiar words can strike us in new ways when we are in new situations. Not so long ago, the word “lockdown” was barely ever used; now it is a daily reality, and one which we know must expect to live with for at least another few weeks. Perhaps that makes it easier for us to identify with the disciples in today’s Gospel, as they meet behind closed doors, in what they hope is a place of safety. But there are important differences between their lockdown and ours. I hope that we are not staying behind closed doors primarily through fear, but rather through a loving concern for all with whom we might otherwise be coming into contact. If social distancing, self-isolation and shielding will help to limit the spread of the virus and save lives then, however challenging it may be, most of us are rightly ready to stay at home wherever possible. More than ever before, we are living our lives behind closed doors.

So our motivation is very different from that of the first disciples, who feared that those who had instigated the trial and execution of Jesus would not stop with the leader of the movement, but would move on to punish the followers as well. But like them we are in lockdown, behind closed doors.

But there is another significant difference between our situation and theirs. The room, we are told, is the one in which the disciples have met. There may not be many of them – probably only just into double figures – but it is a gathering, an assembly. It is here, where the disciples are physically gathered into one space, that the risen Jesus makes his appearance, greets them with words of peace, and breathes his Spirit upon them. They meet as church, in a way that we cannot currently meet.

Part of what the reading teaches us is the importance of that kind of gathering. Thomas’ reluctance to believe, that is often put down to him being an overly sceptical person, seems more attributable to the simple fact that he was not present at that first Easter gathering. Unlike his fellow disciples he did not see Jesus with his own eyes on that day. But a week later, he has come to that locked room, to share in the gathering; and it is in that gathering that, once again, the risen Christ appears.

Meeting together matters. So, although we know and accept that we cannot do so for a little while, and we rightly seek to find new ways of keeping connected with one another, there is nothing wrong in recognising that we are missing something. We miss each other, and the

particular way in which we encounter God through those gatherings, wherever they may be. We look forward in hope to the day when those gatherings can be held again.

But if the Gospel reading tells us something of the importance of physical presence, it also tells us of something that transcends that. Jesus appears on that second occasion to Thomas, and offers him the opportunity to touch the wounds in his side, as Thomas had earlier demanded. But the words of Jesus are enough. Thomas kneels in wonder and adoration and makes the proclamation of faith, “My Lord and my God!”

But then comes the punchline. Jesus says to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” They are extraordinary words, and in some ways amongst the most precious in all the Gospels, because these words are spoken directly to and about us – those of later generations, who have never seen Jesus with our own eyes, let alone touched him with our own hands, but who have nevertheless come to know him and to trust him as our Lord and our God. In recording these words in the Gospel that he wrote, John is assuring us that the presence of Jesus is not limited in time and space, but that wherever we are, whoever we are, we can know him to be with us, as our risen Lord and Saviour. We may think we are on our own, behind locked doors; but Jesus is with us. Alleluia!

### **Prayers of Intercession and Thanksgiving**

Risen Lord Jesus, may we and all your people know your presence with us. As you met with the disciples when they were fearful, give us reassurance and confidence in the face of the difficulties and uncertainties of the present times, and help us to place our fears and our concerns in your hands. As you breathed your Spirit upon your disciples, saying ‘Peace be with you’, so fill us with that same spirit and that peace. **Amen.**

Risen Lord Jesus, we pray for all those whose work and calling takes them into places of danger; and especially for those in the frontline of the battle against COVID-19. We pray for health and care workers, and especially for those working in hospitals and care homes. We pray for funeral directors, crematorium staff, and all who minister to the bereaved. We pray for shop workers, and all who seek to maintain the supply of essential provisions and services. Surround them with your protection, and may they be given the necessary resources for the tasks they undertake. **Amen.**

Risen Lord Jesus, you met with your disciples when they were doubting and unsure, and equipped them to go and share good news. May the time in which we are behind closed doors be a time in which we grow in faith and confidence. Strengthen your Church in the work of the Gospel, so that even where we cannot gather in person we may continue to be formed as your people and as channels of your grace. **Amen.**

Risen Lord Jesus, in appearing to your disciples, you showed them the wounds of love you bear for all humanity. We pray for all who suffer; for the sick, for the anxious, for the vulnerable, and for the dying. Grant that they may know your presence with them in their troubles, and may they know the fullness of your healing and your love. **Amen.**

Risen Lord Jesus, you met with your disciples in their grief and their bewilderment, and transformed their tears of sorrow into tears of joy. Meet with all who are bereaved at this time. Help them to know more fully your comfort and compassion, and bring them the assurance that through your resurrection the power of death has been overcome. **Amen.**

### **Collect**

Almighty Father,  
you have given your only Son to die for our sins  
and to rise again for our justification:  
grant us so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness  
that we may always serve you  
in pureness of living and truth;  
through the merits of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

### **Blessing**

The God of peace,  
who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,  
that great shepherd of the sheep,  
through the blood of the eternal covenant,  
make you perfect in every good work to do his will,  
working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight;  
and the blessing of God Almighty,  
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
be among you and remain with you always.  
Amen.

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