

Sunday 18th April 2021

Luke 24: 36-48 / Acts 3: 12-19

Prayer: Lord God, open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts that we may hear and receive your Word, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We're still celebrating the Easter season – and this is the last Sunday where the gospel reading focuses on Jesus appearing to the disciples after his resurrection.



It starts with troubled hearts, progresses to open minds and results in perhaps the biggest transformation of all, which occurs over the coming weeks – the formation of powerful witnesses.

Many of us have troubled hearts today; hearts filled with grief, fears of going out and concerns on how the future will pan out. Even if it's not ourselves then I'm sure we're all aware of someone close to us who is struggling at this time. Once again – our gospel reading is more than relevant for today!

Why were the disciples troubled? Well their Lord and master had just died the most horrific death possible instigated by the Jewish religious leaders. Not only had all their hopes been shattered but they now feared for their own lives. They gathered together in fear behind locked doors – but even that didn't allay their fears.



Then to add to their confusion and turmoil, some of their women had been to the tomb that morning and received a message from angels that Jesus was alive! They put it down to women's fantasy; no one had slept much the last couple of days – everything had happened so quickly. But now they were hearing more, unexpected and unexplained stories of Jesus being seen alive. Two had just rushed back from Emmaus – the place where they were going for the night – but couldn't stay because they wanted to share that they had met Jesus on the road!!

Troubled hearts, confusion ... what could they make of it all? Fiction or incredible fact? Shattered hopes or an emerging, world transforming hope beyond their wildest imagination?



It was into that complexity that Jesus himself appears with a greeting "Peace be with you". It wasn't just the normal, casual greeting of peace – that perhaps we sometimes share before communion – but a longing that their troubled hearts would know the deep peace of God.

So how did they respond? With joy? No! They were even more startled and frightened and thought they were seeing a ghost. Sometimes we think that Thomas was the only one who doubted – but that was far from it!



However Jesus doesn't chastise them; he reassures them. He meets them where they are. He encourages them to use their senses. Yes they heard him – but he invites them to touch and see and makes the time to show them his hands and feet...

Their emotions are beginning to change.. but they still couldn't believe – although now it was because of joy and amazement! It seemed too good to be true.



Jesus wanted them to be convinced that he was more than a disembodied spirit. He still had a functioning body – although it had some unusual abilities. So he asks them for food – and they gave him a piece of broiled (what we would call grilled) fish which he ate before them.

Sharing a meal together can be a great way of drawing close to people and bringing reassurance. It's one thing I'm really looking forward to as restrictions ease...

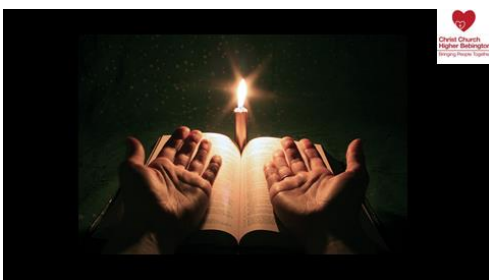
But again Jesus didn't stop there – he wanted them to understand that what happened to him wasn't the most disastrous mistake that could ever have happened. Amazingly it was in fact God's pre-ordained plan to bring people into relationship with him.



Just as he had done hours before with 2 disciples as they walked on the road to Emmaus so Jesus explained to them how all the prophecies in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms about him were now fulfilled. Just as earlier when the 2 disciples felt their hearts burning within them as Jesus opened the scriptures to them so they too had their minds opened. It was a light-bulb moment!

No longer was it a purely emotional response – it was an educated one. As Jews they knew their scriptures well – but they had failed to grasp the significance of the deliverer that Moses had foretold or the suffering servant that Isaiah spoke about. They had interpreted them in the way they wanted. Time and again they had rejected Jesus' predictions about his death – but now they all made sense.

How I would have loved to have been part of that Bible study! Sometimes we hesitate to look into the Old Testament as we believe it's all about judgement - but throughout its pages we can pick out a thread of how God is seeking out relationship with people and preparing to bring about the

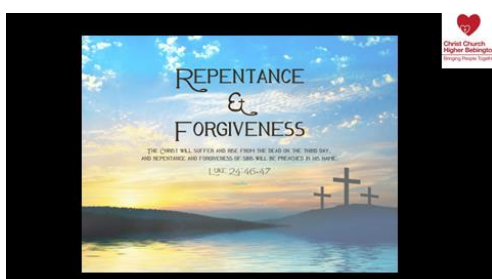


greatest deliverance of all against the greatest problem of all - that of sin separating us from God.

Whenever we pick up the Bible we need to pray that God would open our minds and transform our hearts! When our minds are convinced about how God has fulfilled his promises – and will continue to do so – then peace can begin to fill our troubled hearts. When our focus is on the amazing love of

God and the way He is active throughout history desiring that people come into relationship with him then we can begin to face the future with confidence.

But grasping this doesn't happen overnight. The book of Acts - which continues the story from the gospels - tells us that for the next forty days Jesus presented himself to the disciples giving them many convincing proofs that he was alive – and spoke continually about the kingdom of God.



The Kingdom of God was still Jesus' message. It's a message of repentance and forgiveness; of turning back to God, just as we are – with our fears, failures and doubts to receive his forgiveness and resurrection power to live a new life.

The disciples went from troubled hearts to opened minds. Their understanding of God's

masterplan was enlarged but had it stopped there we would never have known about it! Our reading ended with “You are witnesses of these things”! It’s not enough just to see and even



understand; we need to be prepared to testify about what we have seen. When you’ve shared in something earth changing you just have to share it!

If we had looked around the room that night at Jesus and his disciples we might well have been tempted to say – well that’s the end of that story – you’ll never hear anything more about it.

Couldn’t God have chosen more reliable witnesses? They had all fled at the crucifixion; were hiding behind locked doors; were fearful ... that story will never get shared. But God has a habit of turning what we see as a disaster into a world changing event – and that’s enables us to realise that God is behind it all! His ways are different from ours.

And so we fast-forward, just a few months later, to our reading from Acts where we see a transformed Peter. He is standing before the Jewish religious leaders, having just healed a man in Jesus’ name. He doesn’t hid or mince his words; he is totally confident of what God had done in



Jesus’ resurrection and he even goes as far as to accuse those he was once scared stiff of, as guilty of killing the author of life! All doubts and hesitations gone – he was an eye-witness to it all!

Peter’s message wasn’t one of condemnation – his message was that of the Kingdom of God - of love, hope, forgiveness, restoration and transformation. Peter even encouraged the religious leaders to repent and turn to God, so that their sins may be wiped out and that times of refreshing would come from the Lord.

The Easter story doesn’t end with the historic story of Jesus; each one of us can experience our



own story as we encounter the vibrant, living Christ. We all have different stories of coming to faith and receiving God’s forgiveness – and there’s even more that God has for each one of us.

If we have troubled hearts – then my prayer is that we would know the peace of God. God is there with us; closer than we realise in the darkest times and longing to lead us into a deeper experience of his presence and love. Could it be time to seek his forgiveness and healing afresh?

If we’re unsure of our faith, then maybe we need to go deeper by searching the scriptures, asking God to open our minds and transform our hearts so that we know and experience God’s amazing plan and his Kingdom.

No matter what our story is - God wants us to share it with others – we have something extraordinary to share.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, calm our troubled minds and fill us with your peace. Give us a fresh understanding of how your resurrection changes everything and grant us the confidence to share your message of love and forgiveness with all we meet. Amen