

Order of Service for 24th April 2022 podcast

Catching our Breath

Welcome

Hello, and welcome to Hearsall at home for 24th April 2022. Our service today is called, *Catching our Breath*, as we reflect on the risen Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit onto the disciples.

We begin with that great hymn of praise, *Praise my soul the king of heaven*.

Hymn (BPW 65) **Praise, my Soul, the King of Heaven**

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;
To his feet your tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like me his praise should sing:
Praise Him, praise Him,
Praise Him, praise Him,
Praise the everlasting King.

Praise Him for his grace and favour
To our fathers in distress;
Praise Him still the same for ever,
Slow to chide, and swift to bless.
Praise Him, praise Him,
Praise Him, praise Him,
Glorious in his faithfulness.

Father-like, He tends and spares us;
Well our feeble frame He knows;
In His hands He gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes.
Praise Him, praise Him,
Praise Him, praise Him,
Widely as his mercy flows.

Frail as summer's flower we flourish,
Blows the wind and it is gone;
But while mortals rise and perish,
Our God lives unchanging on.
Praise Him, praise Him,
Praise Him, praise Him,
Praise the high Eternal One!

Angels, help us to adore Him,
You behold Him face to face,
Sun and moon, bow down before Him;
Dwellers all in time and space,
Praise Him, praise Him,
Praise Him, praise Him,
Praise with us the God of grace.

Prayers of Praise, Confession and the Lord's Prayer

Lord God, King of the Universe, we give you our thanks and praise,
for you have made us in your own image,
set us in a universe of wonder,
and rescued us from our sins in your Son Jesus Christ.
You have given us the right to be called your children,
formed us into a community of love
as your church, your body here on earth,
have poured your love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit you have given us,
and filled us with a hope of sharing in resurrection glory.

We praise and adore your most holy name. Amen.

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.

Offering

For all your gifts to us we are profoundly grateful and delight in sharing your gifts with others. Receive our gifts to church, charity and foodbank and use them to share your love in the world at large. Amen.

We sing a song seeking for the Lord to transform our hearts as we receive his love in our hearts.

Song (WT 327) **O Lord, Your Tenderness**

Verse

O Lord, Your tenderness,
Melting all my bitterness,
O Lord, I receive Your love.
O Lord, Your loveliness,
Changing all my ugliness,
O Lord. I receive Your love.

Chorus

*O Lord, I receive Your love,
O Lord, I receive Your love.*

Verse

Chorus x 2

Our prayers of intercession have been prepared by Sandra Noel.

Prayers of Intercession

Father, we come to You now with our concerns, our worries, our hopes and our fears. We come because we know how much You love us, whether we are young or old, healthy or sick, confident or troubled. May we feel Your presence surrounding us and holding us in Your love.

We bring to You our world where there are many troubled people. Especially, Father, we hold before You Ukraine, where the war with Russia seems to be unending at present. Bring peace, Lord, so that those who are fleeing may have some hope for the future. We pray that the women and children who are fearful and sorrowful will know the kindness and hospitality of those countries who are giving aid. May countries like Poland get all the resources needed to help those in trouble. We pray too for the people of Russia, who feel isolated at this time. May any Russians that we know living here, know that we care for them too.

We pray too for South Africa, where heavy floods in the Natal region have caused many deaths. Give all those involved in the rescue services the courage and the strength to save as many folk as possible.

We bring to You our own country where leadership at present is rather confused. May all politicians work together for the good of all. We thank You, Father, for all who work in Social Services—policemen, probation officers, teachers and welfare workers, and all who work in our N.H.S. We pray that You will give them all sympathy, understanding love and firmness, so that all who they come in contact with will feel helped and healed.

Father, we bring to You our church, our minister and deacons, each member of our congregation and those who can no longer attend but hear the service “on-line”. Many have been ill with Covid at this time; we pray that they may soon recover and have the energy once again to do the tasks which have been part of their daily routine.

Bless all children, Lord; we thank You for their innocence, laughter and trust. May we set an example in our own lives to be kind and loving to all whom we meet. We know, Father, that some children do not know what love is. May all agencies and

foster parents help to instil love into their young lives so that they will grow up to be caring folk themselves.

Lord, as we bring to You those who need our special prayers at this time, we hold them all before You now.

Hear our prayers, Father, for we ask them in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen

Let's attend to our Bible readings now from the Psalms and from John's gospel.

Bible Readings

Psalm 118: 14-29

¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and my defence;
he has become my salvation.

¹⁵ Shouts of joy and victory
resound in the tents of the righteous:

'The LORD's right hand has done mighty things!

¹⁶ The LORD's right hand is lifted high;
the LORD's right hand has done mighty things!

¹⁷ I will not die but live,
and will proclaim what the LORD has done.

¹⁸ The LORD has chastened me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.

¹⁹ Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD
through which the righteous may enter.

²¹ I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.

²² The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;

²³ the LORD has done this,
and it is marvellous in our eyes.

²⁴ The LORD has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.

²⁵ LORD, save us!

LORD, grant us success!

²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.

From the house of the LORD we bless you.

²⁷ The LORD is God,

and he has made his light shine on us.

With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession

up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸ You are my God, and I will praise you;

you are my God, and I will exalt you.

²⁹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;

his love endures for ever.

John 20: 19-31

Jesus appears to his disciples

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'

Jesus appears to Thomas

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ 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.'

²⁶ 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!' ²⁷ 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.'

²⁸ Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

The purpose of John's gospel

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. We sing of the triumph of love...

Song Love has Surely Triumphed! (Leonard /Sutcliffe)

Verse 1

The women took their spices to anoint the man they loved,
whose life had been cut short by the ones who clung to power.
But look, the tomb was opened, with angels at the door,
"Fear not, for He has risen!" He's alive forevermore!

Chorus

*Love has surely triumphed!
Jesus lives again!
His life is freely offered to us all!*

Verse 2

Cleopas and his friend were dejected on the road,
sadly talking over the demise of their dear Lord.
When he drew close by them, explaining God's great plan,
then they finally knew him, as he broke the bread again.

Chorus

Love has surely triumphed!

Jesus lives again!

His life is freely offered to us all!

Verse 3

It seemed the dream was over; the disciples locked their door,
Afraid of all the violence that had killed the man they loved.

But Jesus stood among them and showed his hands, his feet.
He ate the fish they offered and blessed them with his peace.

Chorus

Verse 4

So when your hope seems over and your dreams have died away;
When love seems well-defeated and evil powers hold sway,
Take heart, for He is with us, our hope will dawn again
to energise our living with death-defying power!

Chorus

Love has surely triumphed!

Jesus lives again!

His life is freely offered to us all, to us all!

Talk

Catching your Breath

Officially, nearly 22 million people in the United Kingdom have had covid, and 172,000 have died with the disease. Thanks to treatments and vaccines, this is a death rate of under 1%. But covid rates remain high.

As I record this at home, I am recovering from a bout of covid that has so far lasted nine days. Scientists have emphasised how transmission is primarily airborne. In the present climate, we try to stay away from each other's breath. I have been isolating to avoid contact with other people, but also because my energy levels have been low.

Breath is so intimately connected with life. Several times every minute we draw air into our lungs, making what was external a part of ourselves, and releasing what was part of ourselves into the wider environment. The state of being alive continuously depends on our ability to breathe. To be alive is to be part of the world, inside and out. Our bodies relentlessly remind us of this.

And the world has been infected with a virus that interferes with this breathing process. So many have died from respiratory complications. Some have had to sleep sitting up in order to keep breathing. Something which ought to be automatic has become difficult.

Protracted isolation from others can cause our spirits to flag. Our lungs demand oxygen, and our spirits demand connection. People need people. In physical and spiritual terms, we need to catch our breath.

As you will probably know, the notions of breath and spirit are intimately linked in Greek, Hebrew and many other languages. Physically breathing is essential to living, to being. Language itself tells us that to have a spirit is to have a breath.

The English word 'vital' comes from the Latin *vita*, meaning simply *life*. By extension, vital came to mean, absolutely necessary; indispensable for life. Breathing is vital for the body; the Holy Spirit is vital for Christian existence.

Jesus breathed on the disciples and told them to receive the Holy Spirit. It's not that the carbon dioxide, oxygen and nitrogen expelled from Jesus' lungs had magical powers. In his dramatic act, John's Jesus is demonstrating that the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary for spiritual life.

Have these last two years provided opportunities for the world to catch its breath? If so, have we taken them?

The way John tells the story, immediately after breathing the Spirit onto them, the disciples are given a solemn responsibility. This is in the knotty area of forgiveness. As the Father sent Jesus into the world, so the disciples are told that they are sent into the world and are competent to bring a ministry of forgiveness. If they forgive, that forgiveness is **real**. If they don't forgive, that unforgiveness is equally real.

Churches with official priesthoods will interpret this in their own particular way, and may use this verse to teach that only an ordained priest in their religious system can express effectively an absolution for sin. I am sure many have found great comfort in such ministry, but it's a stretch from what the gospel is actually saying here. The 'You' referred to in John's narrative is actually the group of ten disciples, not a set of Roman Catholic or Anglican or Orthodox trainee priests.

Since all Christians may be regarded as disciples, all Christians may share in this solemn ministry of forgiveness. But whom should we forgive?

The answer to that question comes in Jesus. These disciples are sent out *as the Father sent Jesus*. As you recall Jesus' encounters with various people, how did he exercise his ministry of forgiveness? To the shock of religious experts, he often seemed to forgive people very rapidly. Perhaps the only people he didn't seem ready to forgive were those who didn't think they had anything that needed forgiving: the superior types; the religiously scrupulous Pharisees who did their level best to live a holy life; or authority figures who saw Jesus as a threat. Generally speaking, in my reading of the gospels, Jesus easily forgives. His disciples are sent as he was sent. Every time we say the Lord's Prayer we recall the imperative to forgive as we are forgiven.

Jesus' disciples here are called to create a community of grace, where belonging is not tied to performance, wealth, righteousness or status. For such a radically welcoming community, forgiveness is a necessary commodity. Indeed, we might say it is absolutely necessary. Since no one is perfect, everyone needs mercy. Broken relationships must be restored. As the Spirit is vital, so this same Spirit intimates that forgiveness is not just a nice idea but is vital for human wellbeing.

The Holy Spirit is connected here with forgiveness, with connection and with community. An inability to breathe quickly threatens the life of a human body. And an inability to breathe spiritually is a threat to the life of human society. To breathe spiritually is to be kind and merciful with other people. It is to love. If the world is to catch its breath it needs again to learn how to connect, how to forgive and how to love.

John's magnificent gospel is approaching its climax. His dramatised story now presents Thomas, the one who was absent when the risen Jesus previously

appeared. Thomas is a great hero of our faith. He honestly expresses his doubt and outlines his conditions for leaving it behind. Unless he sees and touches the wounds in the risen Jesus' body, he won't believe.

When Jesus comes, Thomas is indeed invited to touch the marks of crucifixion. He makes the purest declaration of Jesus' divinity anywhere in scripture: 'My Lord and my God'.

The gift of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of forgiveness is not simply the latest religious fad. It is inaugurated and sanctioned by one now called Lord and God. If the world needs to catch its breath, well the world needs to catch its God. Or, more accurately, the world needs to be caught up by God again.

Now, Thomas had to see and feel in order to believe. He does the job for us. There was one, like many of us, who wanted the physical evidence, but missed it. He gets it now. But he gets it on our behalf. And John's gospel can't resist making the point for readers explicit: 'Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

This is Thomas' declaration of the nature of Jesus. Actually, it's John's gospel's great climax - no more subtle language about the Word made flesh; no more insider stories portraying Jesus as the new Moses for Jews in the know; no more heavy hints as in the great *I AM* sayings... Now we have an explicit open declaration: *My Lord and my God*.

After this declaration comes an invitation. It's as if John the gospel writer is making a film, and now he turns to camera and directly addresses those who have been watching. Jesus did a whole lot more, but what has been recorded is for this specific purpose: that you, the listener, the reader, the viewer - that YOU may believe in Jesus as the Messiah and as the Son of God, and that this believing will enable you to have life in his name.

Some of us may try to avoid John's eye at this point. Are we ready for the challenge? Can we trust Jesus so that we too experience this life?

Let's summarise what we've learnt. First of all, Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to the ten disciples. Secondly, he sets them up as a community where forgiveness is shared. Thirdly, this spiritual community of forgiveness is valid, because its originator, Jesus

of Nazareth, is now declared to be the supreme being in human form. And then finally, the storyteller looks out of the pages at us, and invites us, too, to find life by taking part in this community.

So as John catches your own eye, are you invited to catch your breath?

Our world of instant global communication is restless. It never sleeps, so it invents apps and podcasts of bedtime stories or soundscapes of gently lapping ocean waves to solve the very problem it has itself created: restlessness, breathlessness, spiritlessness... In sharing the potential of online connection with billions of people, are we at risk of losing real connection with anyone?

In the richly powerful resurrection stories, Jesus brings some wonderful last words before his ascension in a range of different settings to various different people. If some gone-before loved one returned and addressed the topics that trouble you in your life, I wonder what message they might bring. If Jesus joined you in some upper room, what message might he bring? As we stand with the victims of invasion in Ukraine; as we remember those who've lost loved ones to covid; what does Jesus say to us?

Our own development plans as a church - short term and long term - continue to be hampered by covid. Some say we must worship with masks on or they don't feel safe; others feel it's not really church if we can't see each other's faces...

When I was an elder of a church up north, I was once discussing some aspect of church life in a business setting where I worked. The business had rented out one of its computers, and I remember discussing some vital piece of church life with a fellow leader, and being aware that we were being overheard by an unbeliever.

The church business seemed really important to me at the time. We had to get it right. There was a lot at stake. A part of me, even as I discussed this vital church issue, was aware that an unbeliever would be able to hear our debate. I allowed myself to imagine that he might be impressed by the serious work we were doing in the church.

Afterwards, I spoke to this man, and he told me 'how sad' the churchy conversion seemed to him. He was astonished that we could expend such energy on trifling matters.

I was surprised; what we had been discussing had seemed so important! But what had we been discussing? I haven't a clue. I don't remember. History won't give it a footnote. It was like writing on the beach soon washed away by the next tide... Yet, at the time, it, whatever it was, had seemed **vital**.

Jesus, the Son of God, stood among the disciples. He breathed the Holy Spirit on them and gave them the solemn ministry of forgiveness, shaping a community of grace to share the good news of God himself.

These are the things that really matter.

The first century church in Corinth had so many disputes and disagreements with each other. Some of them were even taking fellow Christians to court. In his first letter to this motley Corinthian crew, Paul was flabbergasted!

He asks them questions in chapter 6 that might seem really strange to our ears. He asks, *Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?*

How can he ask such perverse questions? His approach reflects the nature of the church he was trying to establish; something about the very DNA of church life that had been lost. It is this community of grace.

The Holy Spirit breathes God into human hearts; and the Holy Spirit weaves deep connections between people. These are not connections based on status, merit or righteousness, but on forgiveness, mercy and grace. In the divine economy of the kingdom of God, worldly notions are turned upside down.

To be wronged is another opportunity to show grace! To be cheated is another opportunity to show that Christians are different. And that difference is what's vital; essential for life; what really matters.

Christians aren't called to be possessive or territorial or argumentative... They've caught their breath; they've caught the Spirit; they've been caught by God... They've been caught up into the real world, where people can at last see what really matters.

And they've seen that so much of what we dispute about in this world and in the church, doesn't, in the end, matter much at all.

On Easter Sunday, I listened to the Archbishop of Canterbury give a thoughtful reflection on the resurrection message. He gave a theological critique of the government's idea to fly single male asylum seekers to faraway Rwanda. He said the country couldn't subcontract its moral responsibilities; and that doing this was the opposite of God, because God met us in Christ, and stayed with us on the cross. God doesn't push us away; he welcomes us home.

Whether or not we agree with Justin Welby is not my point. My point today is about catching our breath. The next morning I saw the headline in the Daily Express supposedly reporting Welby's comments. It called his sermon a 'rant'.

To call his sermon a rant is like calling Gareth Southgate a football job. But the mindless dismissal of a deeply considered criticism is all too typical of life today. People need to learn to reflect, to catch their breath to grasp what's really important; to understand what is vital.

For me, what's vital is to understand that creating a community of welcome and grace is the mission given to humanity by Jesus Christ in the name of God. At the national level, that probably does raise questions about permanently sending people seeking a safe refuge here to central Africa. At the local level, it means we might consider how we can be a place of welcome, mercy, kindness and love for people from all around the world who find their way to our city, and that the way we do that is the mission given to us by God.

Hymn (BPW 260) **Thine be the Glory**

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son;
endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won;
angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away,
kept the folded grave clothes where thy body lay.

*Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son;
Endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.*

Lo! Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb;
lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom;
let the Church with gladness, hymns of triumph sing;
for her Lord now liveth, death hath lost its sting.

*Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son;
Endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.*

No more we doubt thee, glorious Prince of life;
life is naught without thee; aid us in our strife;
make us more than conquerors, through thy deathless love:
bring us safe through Jordan to thy home above.

*Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son;
Endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.*

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
And the love of God;
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, evermore.
Amen

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
Wherever he may send you;
May he guide you through the wilderness;
Protect you through the storm;
May he bring you home rejoicing
At the wonders he has shown you;
May he bring you home rejoicing
Once again into our doors.