**Home Service Sheet 16th April 2023**

**Call To Worship**                **Isaiah 32:14-17**

For the palace is forsaken,
    the populous city deserted;
the hill and the watchtower
    will become dens forever,
a joy of wild donkeys,
    a pasture of flocks;
until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high,
    and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,
    and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.
Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
    and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
And the effect of righteousness will be peace,
    and the result of righteousness, quietness and trustforever.

**Prayer**

Gracious God, we come to You today with a mixture of thoughts and feelings. Yet, in the midst of trials and tribulation You, O Lord, are worthy to receive our praise and adoration. When all is going well and we have much to celebrate, Your Name is still worthy to be blessed. Whatever is going on around us, Heavenly Father, help us to count our blessings that come from You and be ever thankful to You. Lord, You have promised never to leave us or forsake us, and we thank You for keeping Your promises to us. As we read Your Word today, help us to understand it and put it into practice in our lives. May Your Holy Spirit be at work within us, making us more like Jesus each and every day. These things we ask in Jesus’ Name, amen.

**Hymn                                     Breathe on me, Breath of God**by ***Edwin Hatch***

<https://youtu.be/le_OJznBL6g>

Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew,

That I may love what Thou dost love, and do what Thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, Breath of God, until my heart is pure,

Until with Thee I will one will, to do and to endure.

Breathe on me, Breath of God, till I am wholly Thine,

Until this earthly part of me glows with Thy fire divine.

Breathe on me, Breath of God, so shall I never die,

But live with Thee the perfect life of Thine eternity.

**The Lord’s Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, As it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, The power, and the glory, For ever and ever. Amen.

**Bible Reading                     John 20:19-23**

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And 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 withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

**Reflection**

As we read the Gospels it can feel like the period between Easter Sunday and Pentecost is a time of waiting where little is happening. The joy of Jesus’ resurrection all too easily gives way to doubt and anxiety about what will happen next. Jesus remains here on Earth with His disciples for forty days between His resurrection and His ascension, although it is clear that He is not constantly with them as He has been for the past two or three years before that. They had seen and believed that He had risen from the dead, and they had begun to understand that He was victorious over sin and death, but they were still not quite ready for the new gatherings, or churches, that would emerge soon.

Although our Bible reading today records one of these times with the risen Lord Jesus, it also looks forward to a time that will come very soon. Before Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection there was not such a clear Gospel message, faith in which would bring salvation to the believer. Of course, Jesus had proclaimed, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17) This is the seed that would germinate into the Gospel, but it is not yet fully formed. Following Jesus’ resurrection, though, salvation through faith in Christ had arrived, but the Holy Spirit had not yet been freely given to those who have faith in Jesus. Between Easter and Pentecost there is a period of ‘almost, but not quite’!

As we look at our reading in more detail we note that this happens on the evening of resurrection day, “the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews” (v.19). They have heard that Jesus is alive, but they are still afraid and unsure. Jesus reassures them by saying, “peace be with you”, as angels have done previously throughout the Scriptures. Jesus simply appeared to them behind closed doors, and yet He was still physical and could be touched. From a scientific point of view I do not know how this could happen, but the Bible says that it did. Jesus’ resurrected body is somehow different, but is still physical and able to be touched by others.

In verse 21 Jesus reveals something very important to the disciples. Over the past two or three years Jesus had been preparing them for their ongoing mission, but up until this point they had not fully understood it. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” This must have sounded a bit scary to the disciples, as up to this point Jesus had physically been with them when they had been teaching, preaching and healing the sick. From this point onwards, though, they would be the hands and feet of God here on the Earth. How ever were they going to manage? From where would they get the strength and boldness they needed to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ?

Thankfully, though, Jesus did not keep them in suspense about how they were going to be obedient to His command and calling. He continued, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (v.22) Within 40 days the timid disciples would be transformed into powerful preachers of the Gospel message. No longer would they be afraid of the Jewish leaders, threats of violence or imprisonment. They would gladly obey God first, regardless of the consequences, as some of them demonstrated in their speech before the Jewish Council, “We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29) Are we ready to suffer for the sake of Jesus and His Gospel, if that is required of us to remain faithful and obedient to God?

Our reading concludes with a slightly puzzling saying. Jesus says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (v.23) Was Jesus giving the disciples the authority to forgive, or not forgive, the sins of others? Based on what else the Scriptures say about sin and forgiveness I do not believe that we can conclude this. So what did Jesus mean by this? Taking this in the wider context of preaching the Gospel, to which Jesus calls the disciples, it seems most likely that Jesus is emphasising that people will only have their sins forgiven if they hear the Gospel and respond to it with faith and repentance.

As the Apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Romans 10:14-15) We are all called to share the good news of the Gospel with others, but not in our own strength. We are given the Holy Spirit who will empower us and embolden us to speak with others so that they may hear the Gospel and enter into eternal life through faith in Christ. Amen.

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, thank You that we can have peace with God by grace through faith in Christ's finished work on the cross for us. We thank You too that in Him we can have Your peace to guard our hearts and minds in the midst of a broken and sinful world. Thank You that we can have Your peace reigning in our hearts also, O Lord. We pray today that Your Holy Spirit would empower us to be faithful witnesses to the truth of the glorious Gospel of Christ Jesus. Father, we know that the Christian life is not easy but You promise us Your joy, which comes in the morning. Keep us secure in You day by day. In Jesus’ Name we ask this, amen.

**Benediction**

Send us out today, O Lord, in the power of Your Holy Spirit to proclaim the truth of the Gospel with the love of God for all those we meet. May our lives bring glory to You, O God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit! Amen!