

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



The Church's prayer for Sunday 11th April

Faithful God,
the strength of all who believe
and the hope of those who doubt;
may we, who have not seen, have faith
and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 11th April

A reading from the book of Acts 4:32-35

They Had Everything in Common

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

A Gospel reading from the Gospel of John, Chapter 20 verses 19-end

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

¹⁹ 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,¹⁹ Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."



Jesus and Thomas

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin,^(a) was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although 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, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

The Purpose of This Book

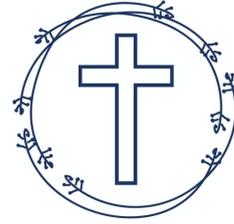
³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

A reflection from Revd Robert Dolman, member of the Lordsbridge Team Chapter

To use a word we’ve all become familiar with in recent months, the disciples of Jesus were ‘shielding’. It’s hardly surprising. They went to ground behind locked doors in a state of shock because their Master, Jesus, in whom they had invested their lives, and from whom they had expected so much, had suffered a cruel, shameful public death. Their dreams had become a nightmare, their hopes were shattered. And they were scared. They were now marked men themselves. What fate awaited them if they dared to venture out and be seen in the public square? They could hardly expect either justice or mercy.

So, they were tense, they could feel their hearts racing within them, they had to keep wiping away the sweat on their palms and their foreheads. All they could do was huddle together and wait for things to quieten down; then perhaps they could make their escape from Jerusalem, perhaps back to Galilee to some rural sanctuary of peace and quiet and safety. Imagine them huddled together, whispering their fears, listening with dread for the sound of voices outside, for the tread of a menacing footstep on the stairs.

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What transformed this tiny group of broken shielding men into the adventurous, dynamic leaders of a church that would spread across the whole world? What gave this little fellowship whose confidence had been destroyed, for whom words had become empty, a powerful message that would transform millions of lives?

It was Jesus, who came and stood amongst them, greeting them with familiar words, 'peace be with you' and breathing on them the power of the Holy Spirit. Peace is the gift of the risen Jesus to the little company of those who had followed him. Before his crucifixion he had made this promise, 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.' Jesus of course did not invent the word. Its origins lay deep in the mists of Jewish time. For Jews the word for peace, shalom, had long been a standard greeting,

It was a word with layers of meaning. Peace did not mean just an inner sense of serenity and calm, a private personal feeling that you were in a comfort zone whatever might be happening around you. And it meant much more than the absence of conflict or war. The Romans maintained peace of a kind in their vast empire. But it was achieved by military force and, when necessary, brutality. The peace of the New Testament was different, what today we would call an holistic word. It had all the rich associations of well-being, of abundance of life, of good and harmonious relationships. And so, shalom, peace, was not just a blessing for the individual. It was not just a dimension of personal spirituality. It belonged as a gift to the whole community of believers. It was to be shared with and lived out with others.

This 'Peace' became a standard greeting amongst Christians. St Paul frequently began his letters to the infant churches around the Mediterranean with such words as, 'Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

He did this because Jesus has invested the word with still more resonance and depth. 'I do not give to you as the world gives.' Christian peace, the legacy of Jesus, speaks to us of a reconciling quality which flows from his death and resurrection. In the letter to the Ephesians Paul reflected on the death of Jesus. Jesus, he wrote, is our peace, in his crucified flesh he has made Jews and Gentiles into one. He has created peace between those who were near and those who were far off; he has created a new humanity.

So truly living in peace takes us, to us another word much in current usage, beyond our 'bubbles'. Peace builds bridges with those different from ourselves. One writer says that Christian peacemakers are those who discover that all people are God's people and belong to the house of love. And the African Archbishop, Desmond Tutu said, 'If you want peace you don't talk to your friends, you talk to your enemy.' Real Christianity isn't about shielding yourself away from the world in the bubble of the like-minded.

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In the branch of the Church I know best I know that a generation or two ago it was common for the timetable and lifestyle of a devout Methodist family to be totally determined by the Methodist Church. Sunday meant two services and Sunday School. Maybe the lady of the house was a communion steward and helped with the preparation of the bread and wine. Maybe one of the couple was a local preacher and several Sundays a quarter was off to some small remote village chapel. This would mean an evening or two writing a sermon and choosing hymns.

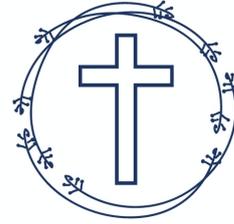
During the week there was a full range of meetings. Before the Church Council was created there was the Leaders' Meeting which dealt with the spiritual life and mission of the Church, and the Trustees who looked after the property and use of the building. Then there would be various chapel committees, Bible Study Groups, class meetings, choir practice, the sewing circle and the women's fellowship and the cubs or brownies or youth group. Maybe the husband and wife were members of the Circuit Meeting or Circuit Committees as well. It was a special day when the Methodist Recorder arrived to shape your mind and keep you informed about what was going on in the wider Methodist Church.

You could spend your summer seaside break at a Methodist Holiday Hotel. If you were well off enough you could send your children to Methodist boarding schools. In some parts of the country an influential member of the congregation might see to it that likely lads found employment in his business. So it was common enough for people to have a close friendship circle composed entirely of Methodists, not really to know anyone else. And maybe the parish church and the Church Times occupied for some a similar exclusive place in Church of England lives.

The Church was like a large bubble. This had its strengths of course. It was warm and secure. Mutual affection was genuine and deep. It offered the spiritual and material support of people you could grow to like and value as friends. It gave lives direction and depth. It was a rich experience and an education to belong. But it also had potential weaknesses. It could become very inward-looking, even a touch narrow-minded and judgmental, and if the bubble burst for any reason it was very difficult to recruit new members because there were few points of contact with the wider society.

If we continue the analogy of the pandemic, the peace that is the gift of Jesus is not so much like the isolation of shielding or the warmth of the bubble as like the virus itself. It does not recognize boundaries and barriers. It spreads widely. It penetrates unexpected places. The Holy Spirit often ignores our rules and regulations, forges new relationships, does new things. The Spirit is disturbing, does not always operate as we would expect or like. We cannot control the Spirit. As one writer put it, 'If you canalize the wind with a stone drainpipe it isn't the wind that you get but a draught.'

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So, if we are to be agents of peace, we need to remember this. Yes, there may be times set aside for shielding, perhaps times of retreat when we keep the world and its concerns at bay. Yes, there are certainly times when we need the security of the Church bubble, its warmth and support. But God also calls Christians to go viral, to cross boundaries, to forge friendships, to listen to and to understand the world which he loves and longs to see transformed and healed. Being makers of peace means working for wholeness and justice and healing everywhere.

John Masefield, a twentieth century Poet Laureate, wrote a play called *The Trial of Jesus*. He introduces the character of Procula, the wife of Pontius Pilate. According to St Matthew's Gospel she had a dream that convinced her of the innocence of Jesus, and she warned Pilate to have nothing to do with him. In the play Procula is talking to the centurion, Longinus, who supervised the crucifixion, and asks him whether he thinks Jesus is really dead. Longinus says no. Procula asks, 'then, where is he?'

And Longinus replies, 'Let loose in all the world, lady, 'where neither Roman nor Jew can stop his truth.'